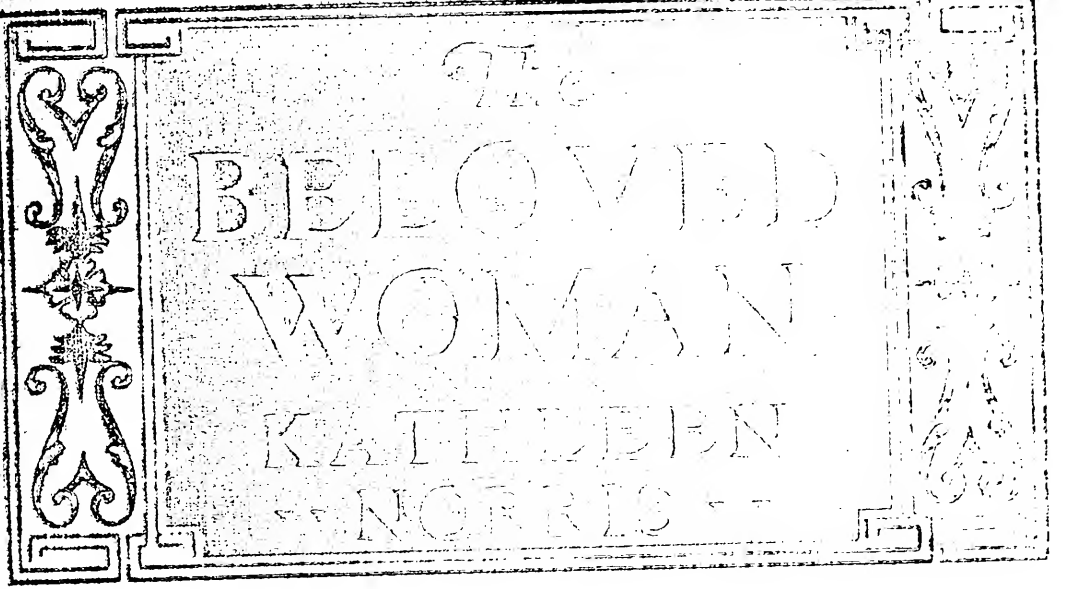
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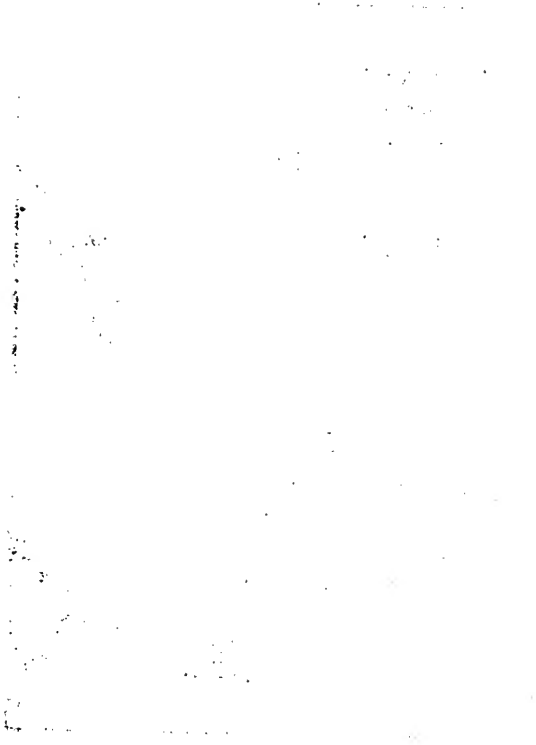

THE
BELOVED WOMAN

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By KATHLEEN NORRIS

Author of
"Harriet and the Piper," etc.

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TO

MARY O'SULLIVAN SUTRO

For gifts beyond all counting and esteeming,
For kindness than which Heaven's self is not kinder,
For the old days of tears, and smiles, and dreaming,
This in acknowledgment, and in reminder.

THE BELOVED WOMAN

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CHAPTER I

For forty-eight hours the snow-storm had been raging unabated over New York. After a wild and windy Thursday night the world had awakened to a mysterious whirl of white on Friday morning, and to a dark, strange day of steady snowing. Now, on Saturday, dirty snow was banked and heaped in great blocks everywhere, and still the clean, new flakes fluttered and twirled softly down, powdering and feathering every little ledge and sill, blanketing areas in spotless white, capping and hooding every unsightly hydrant and rubbish-can with exquisite and lavish beauty. Shovels had clinked on icy sidewalks all the first day, and even during the night the sound of shouting and scraping had not ceased for a moment, and their more and more obvious helplessness in the teeth of the storm awakened at last in the snow-shovellers, and in the men and women who gasped and stumbled along the choked thoroughfares, a sort of heady exhilaration in the emergency, a tendency to be proud of the storm, and of its effect upon their humdrum lives. They laughed and shouted as they battled with it, and as Nature's great barrier of snow threw down the little barriers of convention and shyness. Men held out their hands to slipping and stumbling women, caught

them by their shoulders, panted to them that this was a storm, all right, this was the worst yet! Girls, staggering in through the revolving glass doors of the big department stores, must stand laughing helplessly for a few seconds in the gush of reviving warmth, while they beat their wet gloves together, regaining breath and self-possession, and straightened outraged millinery.

Traffic was congested, deserted trucks and motor-cars lined the side streets, the subways were jammed, the surface cars helpless. Here and there long lines of the omnibuses stood blocked in snow, and the press frantically heralded impending shortages of milk and coal, reiterating pessimistically: "No relief in sight!"

But late in Saturday morning there was a sudden lull. The snow stopped, the wind fell, and the pure, cold air was motionless and sweet. The city emerged exhausted from its temporary blanketing, and from the buried benches of Bowling Green to the virgin sweep of pure white beyond Van Cortlandt Park, began its usual January fight with the snow.

A handsome, rosy old lady, wrapped regally in furs, and with a maid picking her way cautiously beside her, was one of the first to take advantage of the sudden change in the weather. Mrs. Melrose had been held captive for almost two days, first by Thursday's inclement winds, and then by the blizzard. Her motor-car was useless, and although at sixty she was an extremely youthful and vigorous woman, her daughters and granddaughter had threatened to use force rather than let her risk the danger of an expedition on foot, at least while the storm continued.

But now the wind was gone, and by the time Mrs.

Melrose had been properly shod, and coated, and hatted, there was even a dull glimmer toward the southeast that indicated the location of the long-lost sun. The old lady looked her approval at Fifth Avenue, with all its crudities veiled and softened by the snowfall, and as she climbed into an omnibus expressed herself firmly to Regina.

"You mark my words, the sun will be out before we come home!"

Regina, punching the two dimes carefully into the jolting receiver, made only a respectful murmur for answer. She was, like many a maid, a snob where her mistress was concerned, and she did not like to have Mrs. Melrose ride in public omnibuses. For Regina herself it did not matter, but Mrs. Melrose was one of the city's prominent and wealthy women, and Regina could not remember that she had ever sunk to the use of a public conveyance before to-day. The maid was glad when they descended at a street in the East Sixties. They would probably be sent home, she reflected, in Mrs. Liggett's car. For Regina noticed that private cars were beginning to grind and slip over the snow again.

Old Mrs. Melrose was going to see her daughter Alice, who was Mrs. Christopher Liggett, because Alice was an invalid. It had been only a few years after Alice's most felicitous marriage, a dozen years ago, when an accident had laid the lovely and brilliant woman upon the bed of helplessness that she might never leave again. There was no real reason why the spine should continue useless, the great specialists said, there was a hope—even a probability—that as Alice grew rested and strong, after the serious accident, she might find

herself walking again. But Alice had been a prisoner for ten years now, and the mother and sister who idolized her feared that she would never again be the old dancing Alice and feared that she knew it. What Christopher Liggett feared they did not know. He insisted that Alice's illness was but temporary, and was tireless in his energetic pursuit of treatment for his wife. Everything must be hoped, and everything must be tried, and Alice's mother knew that one of the real crosses of her daughter's life was sorrowful pity for Chris's optimistic delusions.

The young Liggetts had sold the old house of Christopher's father, an immense brownstone mansion a few squares away, and lived in a modern, flat-faced gray-stone house that rose five stories from the beautifully arranged basement entrance. There were stone benches at the entrance, and a great iron grill, and two potted trees, and the small square windows were leaded, and showed blossoming plants inside. The three long windows above gave upon a little-used formal drawing-room, with a Gothic fireplace of white stone at one end, and a dim jumble of rich colours and polished surfaces between that and the big piano at the other. The room at the back, on this floor, was an equally large and formal dining-room, gleaming with carved mahogany and fretted plate, used only on the rare occasions of a dinner-party.

But on the floor above the gracious mistress of the house had her domain, and here there was enough beauty and colour to make the whole house live. The front room, cool all summer because it faced north, and warm all winter, because of the great open fireplace that augmented the furnace heat, was Alice's

sitting-room; comfortable, beautiful, and exquisitely ordered. None of the usual clutter of the invalid was there. The fireplace was of plain creamy tiling, the rugs dull-toned upon a dark, polished floor. There were only two canvases on the dove-gray walls, and the six or seven photographs that were arranged together on the top of one of the low, plain, built-in bookcases, were framed alike. There were no meaningless vases, no jars or trays or plaques or ornaments in Alice's room. Her flowers she liked to see in shining glass bowls; her flat-topped desk was severely bare.

But the cretonne that dressed her big comfortable chairs and her couch was bright with roses and parrots and hollyhocks, and the same cretonne, with plain net undercurtaining, hung at her four front windows. The room was big enough to accommodate besides, even with an air of space and simplicity, the little grand piano that Christopher played for her almost every night. A great Persian tortoise-shell cat was at home here, and sometimes Alice had her magnificent parrot besides, hanging himself upside down on his gaily-painted stand, and veiling the beady, sharp eye with which he watched her. The indulgent extravagance of her mother had bound all the books that Alice loved in the same tone of stony-blue vellum, the countless cushions with which the aching back was so skillfully packed were of the same dull tone, and it pleased the persons who loved her to amuse the prisoner sometimes with a ring in which her favourite note was repeated, or a chain of old lapis-lazuli that made Alice's appreciative blue eyes more blue.

Back of Alice's room was a den in which Christopher could conduct much of his personal business, and be-

yond that was the luxurious bathroom, a modern miracle of enamel tiling and shining glass. Across the sun-flooded back of the house were Alice's little bedroom, nunlike in its rigid austerity, her nurse's room adjoining, and a square sun-room, giving glimpses of roofs and trim back-gardens, full of flowers, with a little fountain and goldfish, a floor of dull pink tiling, and plants in great jars of Chinese enamel. Christopher had planned this delightful addition to Alice's domain only a few years ago, and, with that knowledge of her secret heart that only Christopher could claim, had let her share the pleasure of designing and arranging it. It stretched out across the west side of the spacious backyard, almost touching the branches of the great plane tree, and when, after the painful move to her mother's house, and the necessary absence during the building of it, Alice had been brought back to this new evidence of their love and goodness, she had buried her face against Christopher's shoulder, and told him that she didn't think people with all the world to wander in had ever had anything lovelier than this!

One of the paintings that Alice might look at idly, in the silence of the winter noon, was of a daisied meadow, stretching between walls of heavy summer woodland to the roof of a half-buried farmhouse in the valley below. The other picture was of the very mother who was coming toward Alice now, in the jolting omnibus. But it was a younger mother, and a younger Alice, that had been captured by the painter's genius. It was a stout, imperious, magnificently gowned woman, of not much more than thirty, in whose spreading silk lap a fair little girl was sitting. This little earnest-eyed child was Alice at seven. The splendid, dark-

eyed, proud-looking boy of about fourteen, who stood beside the mother, was Teddy, her only son, dead now for many years, and perhaps mercifully dead. The fourth and last person pictured was the elder daughter, Annie, who had been about nine years old then, Alice remembered. Annie and Alice had been unusually alike, even for sisters, but even then Annie's fair, aristocratic type of blonde prettiness had been definite where Alice's was vague, and Annie's expression had been just a trifle haughty and discontented where Alice's was always grave and sweet. Annie had almost been a beauty, she was extremely and conspicuously good-looking even now, when as Mrs. Hendrick von Behrens, wife of a son of an old and wealthy Knickerbocker family, she was supreme in the very holy of holies of the city's social life.

Mrs. Melrose came unannounced upon her daughter to-day, and Alice's colourless warm cheek flushed with happiness under her mother's fresh, cold kiss.

"Mummy—you darling! But how did you get here? Miss Slater says that the streets are absolutely impassable!"

"I came in the 'bus, dear," Mrs. Melrose said, very much pleased with herself. "How warm and comfy you are in here, darling. But what did I interrupt?"

"You didn't interrupt anything," Alice said, quickly. "Chris telephoned, and he's bringing Henrici—the Frenchman who wrote that play I loved so—to tea. Isn't that fun? I'm so excited—and I think Chris was such a duck to get hold of him. I was translating it, you know, and Bowditch, who was here for dinner last night, told me he'd place it, if I finished it. And now I can talk it over with Henrici himself—thanks to

Chris! Chris met my man at the club, and told him about me, and he said he would be charmed. So I telephoned several persons, and I tried to get hold of Annie——"

"Annie has a lunch—and a board meeting at the hospital at four," Annie's mother remembered, "and Leslie is at a girls' luncheon somewhere. Annie had breakfast with me, and was rushing off afterward. She's quite wonderfully faithful about those things."

"Well, but you'll stay for lunch and tea, too, Mummy?" Alice pleaded. She was lying back in her pillows, feasting her eyes upon her mother's face with that peculiarly tense devotion that was part of her nature. Rarely did a day pass without their meeting, and no detail touching Annie's life, Annie's boys or husband, was too small to interest Alice. She was especially interested, too, in Leslie, the eighteen-year-old daughter that her brother Theodore had left to his mother's care; in fact, between the mother and daughters, the one granddaughter and two little grandsons, and the two sons-in-law of the Melrose family, a deep bond existed, a bond of pride as well as affection. It was one of their favourite boasts that to the Melroses the unity and honour of the family was the first consideration in the world.

But to-day Mrs. Melrose could not stay. At one o'clock she left Alice to be put into her prettiest robe by the devoted Miss Slater, saw with satisfaction that preparations for tea were noiselessly under way, called Regina, odorous of tea and mutton chops, from the pantry, and went out into the quiet cold of the winter noon.

The old Melrose house was a substantial, roomy,

brownstone building in Madison Avenue, inconspicuous perhaps among several notoriously handsome homes, but irreproachably dignified none the less. A few blocks below it the commercial current of East Thirty-fourth Street ebbed and flowed; a few blocks north the great façade of the Grand Central Station shut off the street completely. Third Avenue, behind it, swarmed and rattled alarmingly close, and Broadway flared its impudent signs only five minutes' walk in the other direction, but here, in a little oasis of quiet street, two score of old families serenely held their place against the rising tide, and among them the Melroses confidently felt themselves valued and significant.

Mrs. Melrose mounted her steps with the householder's secret complacency. They were scrupulously brushed of the last trace of snow, and the heavy door at the top swung noiselessly open to admit her. She suddenly realized that she was very tired, that her fur coat was heavy, and her back ached. She swept straight to the dark old curving stairway, and mounted slowly.

"Joseph," she said over her shoulder, "send luncheon upstairs, please. And when Miss Leslie comes in, tell her I should like to see her, if it isn't too late. Anybody coming to-night?"

"Mr. von Behrens telephoned that he and Mr. Liggett might come in for a moment, on his way to the banquet at the Waldorf, Madam. But that was all."

"I may have dinner upstairs, too, if Leslie is going anywhere," Mrs. Melrose said to herself, mounting slowly. And it seemed to her fatigue very restful to find her big room warm and orderly, her coal fire burning

behind the old-fashioned steel rods, all the homely, comfortable treasures of her busy years awaiting her. She sank into a chair, and Regina flew noiselessly about with slippers and a loose silk robe. Presently a maid was serving smoking-hot bouillon, and Mrs. Melrose felt herself relaxed and soothed; it was good to be home.

Yet there was trace of uneasiness, of something almost like apprehension, in the look that wandered thoughtfully about the overcrowded room. Presently she reached a plump, well-groomed hand toward the bell. But when Regina came to stand expectantly near her, Mrs. Melrose roused herself from a profound abstraction to assure her that she had not rung—it must have been a mistake.

"Miss Leslie hasn't come in?"

"Not yet, Madam. Miss Melrose is at Miss Higgins's luncheon."

"Yes; but it was an early luncheon," the grandmother said, discontentedly. "She was playing squash, or tennis, or something! Regina——"

"Yes, Madam?"

But Mrs. Melrose was musing again.

"Regina, I am expecting a caller at four o'clock, a Mrs. Sheridan. Please see that she is shown up at once. I want to see her here. And please——"

A pause. Regina waited.

"That's all!" her mistress announced, suddenly.

Alone again, the old lady stirred her tea, ruminated for a few moments with narrowed eyes fixed on space, recalled herself to her surroundings, and finished her cup.

Her room was large, filled with chairs and tables, lamps and cushions, silver trays and lacquer boxes,

vases and jars and bowls, gift books and current magazines. There was not an unbroken inch of surface anywhere, the walls were closely set with pictures of all sorts. Along the old-fashioned mantel, a scalloped, narrow shelf of marble, was a crowding line of photographs in silver frames, and there were other framed photographs all about the room. There were the young mothers of the late eighties, seated to best display their bustles and their French twists, with heavy-headed infants in their tightly cased arms, and there were children's pictures, babes in shells, in swings, or leaning on gates. There were three Annies: one in ringlets, plaid silk, and tasselled boots, at eight; one magnificent in drawing-room plumes; and a recent one, a cloudy study of the severely superb mother, with a sleek-headed, wide-collared boy on each side of her. There was a photograph of the son Theodore, handsome, sullen, dressed in the fashion of the opening century, and there was more than one of Theodore's daughter, the last of the Melroses. Leslie had been a wide-eyed, sturdy little girl who carried a perpetually surprised, even a babyish expression into her teens, but her last pictures showed the débutante, the piquant and charming eighteen-year-old, whose knowingly tipped hat and high fur collar left only a glimpse of pretty and pouting face between.

Leslie came in upon her grandmother at about three o'clock. She was genuinely tired, after an athletic morning at the club, a luncheon amid a group of chattering intimates, and a walk with the young man whose attentions to her were thrilling not only her grandmother and aunts, but the cool-blooded little Leslie herself. Acton Liggett was Christopher's only

brother, only relative indeed, and promised already to be as great a favourite as the irresistible Chris himself. Both were rich, both fine-looking, straightforward, honourable men, proud of their own integrity, their long-established family, and their old firm. Acton was pleasantly at home in the Melrose, Liggett, and Von Behrens houses, the very maids loved him, and his quiet singling out of Leslie for his devotion had satisfied everyone's sense of what was fitting and delightful. Pretty Leslie, back from a summer's idling with Aunt Annie and the little boys, in California and Hawaii, had found Acton's admiration waiting for her, with all the other joys of her débutante winter.

And even the critical Aunt Annie had to admit that the little minx was managing the whole matter with consummate skill. Leslie was not in the least self-conscious with Acton; she turned to him with all the artless confidence of a little sister. She asked him about her dancing partners, and about her gowns, and she discussed with him all the various bits of small gossip that concerned their own friends.

"Should I have said that, Acton?" she would ask, trustfully. "Shall I be Marion's bridesmaid? Would you?—after I refused Linda Fox, you know. I don't like to dance with Louis Davis, after what you told me; what shall I do when he comes up to me?"

Acton was twenty-five, seven years her senior. He advised her earnestly, over many a confidential cup of tea. And just lately, the grandmother noticed exultantly, hardly a day passed that did not find the young couple together.

"How did Acton happen to meet you, lovey?" she asked to-day, *apropos* of the walk.

"Why, he telephoned Vesta Higgins's, and asked me how I was going to get home. I said, walk. There was no use trying motor-cars, anyway, for they were slipping and bumping terribly! He said he was in the neighbourhood, and he came up. Granny——"

She paused, and her grandmother was conscious of a quickened heart-beat. The thoughtful almost tremulous tone was not like giddy little Leslie.

"Granny," the girl repeated, presently, "how old was my mother when she got married?"

"About twenty-two," the old woman said.

"And how old was Aunt Annie when she did?"

"Annie's about thirty-seven," her mother considered. "She was about twenty-five. But why, dear?"

"Nothing," said Leslie, and fell silent.

She was still in the silk blouse and short homespun skirt that she had worn at the athletic club luncheon, but she had thrown aside her loose woolly coat, and the narrow furs that were no softer than her own fair skin. Flung back into a deep chair, and relaxed after her vigorous day, she looked peculiarly childish and charming, her grandmother thought. She was like both her aunts, with Annie's fair, almost ashen hair and Alice's full, pretty mouth. But she was more squarely built than either, and a hint of a tip, at the end of her nose, gave her an expression at once infantile and astonished. When Leslie opened her blue eyes widely, and stared at anything, she looked like an amazed baby, and the effect of her round eyes and tilted nose was augmented by her very fair skin, and by just a sixteenth of an inch shortness in her upper lip. Of course she knew all this. Her acquaintance with her own good and bad points had begun in school

days, and while through her grandmother's care her teeth were being straightened, and her eyes and throat subjected to mild forms of surgery, her Aunt Annie had seen to it that her masses of fair hair had been burnished and groomed, her hands scraped and polished into beauty, and finally that her weight was watched with scrupulous care. Nature had perhaps intended Leslie to be plump and ruddy, but modern fashion had decreed otherwise, and, with half the girls of her own age and set, Leslie took saccharine in her tea, rarely touched sweets or fried food, and had the supreme satisfaction of knowing that she was actually too slim and too willowy for her height, and interestingly colourless into the bargain.

Could Acton possibly have said anything definite to start this unusual train of thought, the grandmother speculated. With Leslie so felicitously married, she would have felt ready for her *nunc dimittis*. She watched Leslie expectantly. But the girl was apparently dreaming, and was staring absently at the tip of one sturdy oxford above which a stretch of thick white woollen stocking was visible almost to her knee.

"How can they fall in love with them, dressed like Welsh peasants!" the grandmother said to herself, in mild disapproval. And aloud she said: "Ah, don't, lovey!"

For Leslie had taken out a small gold case, and was regarding it thoughtfully.

"My first to-day, on my honour!" Leslie said, as she lazily lighted a sweet-scented cigarette. It never occurred to her to pay any attention to her grandmother's protest, for Grandmother had been regularly

protesting against everything Leslie had done since her adored and despotic childhood. She had fainted when Leslie had dived off the dock at Newport, and had wept when Leslie had galloped through the big iron gates on her own roan stallion; she had called in Christopher, as Leslie's guardian, when Leslie, at fifteen, had calmly climbed into one of the big cars, and driven it seven miles, alone and unadvised, and totally without instruction or experience. Leslie knew that this half-scandalized and wholly-admiring opposition was one of her grandmother's secret satisfactions, and she combatted it only mechanically.

"Have one, Grandma?"

"Have one—you wild girl you! I'd like to know what a nice young man thinks when a refined girl offers him——"

"All the nice young men are smoking themselves, like chimneys!"

"Ah, but that's a very different thing. No, my dear, no man, whether he smokes himself or not, likes to have a sweet, womanly girl descend——"

"Darling, didn't you ever do anything that my revered great-grandmother Murison disapproved of?" Leslie teased, dropping on her knees before her grandmother, and resting her arms on her lap.

"Smoke——! My mother would have fainted," said Mrs. Melrose. "And don't blow that nasty-smelling stuff in my face!"

But she could not resist the pleasure that the lovely young face, so near her own, gave her, and she patted it with her soft, wrinkled hand. Suddenly Leslie jumped up eagerly, listening to the sound of voices in the hall.

"There's Aunt Annie—oh, goody! I wanted to ask her——"

But it was Regina who opened the door, showing in two callers. The first was a splendid-looking woman of perhaps forty-five, with a rosy, cheerful face, and wide, shrewd gray eyes shining under a somewhat shabby mourning veil. With her was a pretty girl of eighteen, or perhaps a little more.

Leslie glanced astonished at her grandmother. It was extremely unusual to have callers shown in in this unceremonious fashion, even if she had been rather unprepossessed by these particular callers. The younger woman's clothing, indeed, if plain, was smart and simple; her severe tailor-made had a collar of beaver fur to relieve its dark blue, and her little hat of blue beaver felt was trimmed only by a band of the same fur. She had attractive dark-blue eyes and a flashing smile.

But her companion's comfortable dowdiness, her black cotton gloves, her squarely built figure, and worn shoes, all awakened a certain contempt in the granddaughter of the house, and caused Leslie shrewdly to surmise that these humble strangers were pensioners of her grandmother, the older one probably an old servant.

"Kate Sheridan!" Old Mrs. Melrose had gotten to her feet, and had put her arm about the visitor. "Well, my dear, my dear, I've not seen you these—— What is it? Don't tell me how many years it is! And which daughter is this?"

"This is my niece, Norma," the older woman said, in a delightful rich voice that was full of easy confidence and friendliness. "This is Mrs. Melrose, Norma,

darling, that was such a good friend to me and mine years ago!"

"No warmer friend than you were to me, Kate," the old lady said, quickly, still keeping an arm about the sturdy figure. "This is my granddaughter, Theodore's little girl," Mrs. Melrose added, catching Leslie with her free hand.

Leslie was not more of a snob than is natural to a girl of her age and upbringing, but she could not but give Mrs. Sheridan a pretty cool glance. Grandmother's old friends were all very well——

But Mrs. Sheridan was studying her with affectionate freedom.

"And isn't she Miss Alice's image! But she's like you all—she's like Mr. Theodore, too, especially through the eyes!"

And she turned back to her hostess, interested, animated, and as oblivious to Leslie's hostile look as if the girl were her own picture on the wall.

"And you and my Norma must know each other," she said, presently, watching the girls as they shook hands, with a world of love and solicitude in her eyes.

"Sit down, both you two," Mrs. Melrose said. Leslie glanced at the strapped watch at her wrist.

"Grandmother, I really——" she began.

"No, you don't really!" her grandmother smiled. "Talk to Miss Sheridan while I talk"— she turned smiling to her old friend—"to Kate! Tell me, how are you all, Kate? And where are you all—you were in Detroit?"

"We've been in New York more than two years now, and why I haven't been to see you before, perhaps *you* can tell me, for *I* can't!" Kate Sheridan

said. "But my boy is a great big fellow now; Wolf's twenty-four, and Rose is twenty-one, and this one," she nodded toward Norma, who was exchanging comments on the great storm with Leslie, "this one is nearly nineteen! And you see they're all working: Wolf's doing wonderfully with a firm of machine manufacturers, in Newark, and Rose has been with one real estate firm since we came. And Norma here works in a bookstore, up the Avenue a bit, Biretta's."

"Why, I go in there nearly every week!" the old lady said.

"She told me the other night that she had been selling some books to Mr. Christopher Liggett, and that's Miss Alice's husband, I hear," said Mrs. Sheridan. "She's in what they call the Old Book Room," she added, lowering her voice. "She's wonderful about books, reads them, and knows them as if they were children—they think the world of her in there! And I keep house for the three of them, and what with this and that—I never have any time!"

"But you have someone to help you, Kate?" the old lady asked, with her amused and affectionate eyes on the other's wholesome face.

"Why would I?" demanded Mrs. Sheridan, roundly. "The girls are a great help——"

"She always assumes a terrific brogue the minute you ask her why we don't have someone in to help her," Norma contributed, with a sort of shy and loving audacity. "She'll tell you in a minute that faith, she and her sister used to run barefoot over the primroses, and they blooming beyond anything the Lord ever created, and the spring on them——"

Leslie Melrose laughed out suddenly, in delighted

appreciation, and the tension between the two girls was over. They had not quite known how to talk to each other; Norma naturally assuming that Leslie looked down upon a seller of books, and anxious to show her that she was unconscious of either envy or inferiority, and Leslie at a loss because her usual social chatter was as foreign here as a strange tongue would be. But no type is quicker to grasp upon amusement, and to appreciate the amuser, than Leslie's, unable to amuse itself, and skilled in seeking for entertainment. She was too shy to ask Norma to imitate her aunt again, but her stiffness relaxed, and she asked Norma if it was not great "fun" to sell things—especially at Christmas, for instance. Norma asked in turn if Mr. Liggett was not Leslie's uncle, and said that she had sold him hundreds of beautiful books for his wife, and had even had a note from Leslie's Aunt Alice, thanking her for some little courtesy.

"But isn't that funny!" Leslie said, with her childish widening of the eyes. "That you should know Chris!"

"Well, now," said Mrs. Sheridan's voice, cutting across both conversations, "where can these girls go for about fifteen minutes? I'll tell you my little bit of business, Mrs. Melrose, and then Norma and I will go along. It won't take me fifteen minutes, for there's nothing to decide to-day," the girls heard her add, comfortably, as they went into the hall.

"Leslie!" her grandmother called after her. "If you must change, dear—but wait a minute, is that Aunt Annie out there?"

"No, Grandma, just ourselves. What were you going to say?"

"I was going to say, lovey, that you could ask Miss

Sheridan to wait in the library; her aunt tells me she is fond of books." Mrs. Melrose did not quite like to commit Leslie to entertaining the strange girl for perhaps half an hour. She was pleasantly reassured by Leslie's answering voice:

"We'll have tea in my room, Grandma. Marion and Doris may come in!"

"That's right, have a good time!" her grandmother answered. And then settling back comfortably, she added with her kind, fussy superiority, "Well, Kate, I've wondered where you were hiding yourself all this time! Let's have the business. But first I want to say that I appreciate your turning to me. If it's money—I've got it. If it's something else, Chris Liggett is one of the cleverest men in New York, and we'll consult him."

"It's not money, thank God!" Mrs. Sheridan said, in her forthright voice. "Lord knows where it all comes from, these days, but the children always have plenty," she added, glad of a diversion. "They bought themselves a car two years ago, and if it isn't a Victrola this week, it's a thermos bottle, or a pair of white buckskin shoes! Rose told me she paid eight dollars for her corsets. 'Eight dollars for what,' I said, 'a dozen?' But then I've the two houses in Brooklyn, you know——"

"You still have those?"

"I have, indeed. And even the baby—we call Norma the baby—is earning good money now."

"She has your name, Kate—Sheridan. Had your husband a brother?"

Kate Sheridan's face grew a trifle pale. She glanced at the door to see that it was shut, and at the one to the

adjoining room to make sure that it was closed also. Then she turned to Mrs. Melrose, and it was an anxious glance she directed at the older woman.

"Well, now, there's no hurry about this," she began, "and you may say that it's all nonsense, and send me packing—and God knows I hope you will! But it just began to get on my mind—and I've never been a great one to worry! I'll begin at the beginning——"

CHAPTER II

MARION DUER and Doris Alexander duly arrived for tea with Leslie, and Norma was introduced. They all sat in Leslie's room, and laughed as they reached for crumpets, and marvelled at the storm. Norma found them rather younger than their years, and shyly anxious to be gracious. On her part she realized with some surprise that they were not really unapproachable, and that Leslie was genuinely anxious to take her to tea with Aunt Alice some day, and have them "talk books and things." The barriers between such girls as this one and herself, Norma was honest enough to admit, were largely of her own imagining. They were neither so contemptibly helpless nor so scornfully clever as she had fancied them; they were just laughing girls, absorbed in thoughts of gowns and admirers and good times, like her cousin Rose and herself.

There had been perhaps one chance in one hundred that she and Leslie Melrose might at once become friends, but by fortunate accident that chance had favoured them. Leslie's spontaneous laugh in Mrs. Melrose's room, her casual mention of tea, her appreciative little phrases as she introduced to Marion and Doris the young lady who picked out books for Aunt Alice, had all helped to crush out the vaguely hostile impulse Norma Sheridan had toward rich little members of a society she only knew by hearsay. Norma had found herself sitting on Leslie's big velvet couch

laughing and chatting quite naturally, and where Norma chatted naturally the day was won. She could be all friendliness, and all sparkle and fun, and presently Leslie was listening to her in actual fascination.

The butler announced a motor-car, a maid came up; Doris and Marion had to go. Leslie and Norma went into Leslie's dressing-room, and Leslie's maid went obsequiously to and fro, and the girls talked almost intimately as they washed their hands and brushed their hair. Neither cared that the time was passing.

But the time was passing none the less. Five o'clock came with a pale and uncertain sunset, and a cold twilight began to settle over the snowy city. Leslie and Norma came back to the fire, and were standing there, a trifle uncertainly, but still talking hard and fast, when there was an interruption.

They looked at each other, paling. What was that?

There was utter silence in the old house. Leslie, with a frightened look at Norma, ran to the hall door. As she opened it Mrs. Sheridan opened the door of her grandmother's room opposite, and called, quite loudly:

"It's nothing, dear! Get hold of your grandmother's maid—somebody! She feels a little—but she's quite all right!"

Leslie and Norma ran across the hall, and into Mrs. Melrose's room. By this time Regina had come flying in, and two of the younger maids, and Joseph had run upstairs. Leslie had only one glimpse of her grandmother, leaning against Regina's arm, and drinking from a glass of water that shook in the maid's hands. Then Mrs. Sheridan guided both herself and Norma firmly into the hall, and reassured them cheerfully:

"The room was very hot, dear, and your grandmother said that she had gotten tired, walking in the wind. She's quite all right—you can go in immediately. No; she didn't faint—she just had a moment of dizziness, and called out."

Regina came out, too evidently convinced that she had to deal with a murderess, and coldly asked that Mrs. Sheridan would please step back for a minute. Mrs. Sheridan immediately complied, but it was hardly more than a minute when she joined the girls again.

"She wants to see you, dear," she said to Leslie, whose first frightened tears had dried from bewilderment and curiosity, "and we must hurry on. Come, Norma, we'll say good-night!"

"Good-night, Miss Melrose," Norma said.

"Good-night," Leslie answered, hesitating over the name. Her wide babyish smile, the more appealing because of her wet lashes, made a sudden impression upon Norma's heart. Leslie hung childishly on the upstairs balustrade, in the dim wide upper hall, and watched them go. "I—I almost called you Norma!" she confessed, mischievously.

"I wish you had!" Norma called up from below. She was in great spirits as they went out into the deepening cold blue of the street, and almost persuaded her aunt to take the omnibus up the Avenue. But Mrs. Sheridan protested rather absentmindedly against this extravagance. They were close to the subway and that was quicker.

Norma could not talk in the packed and swaying train, and when they emerged at Sixty-fifth Street they had only one slippery, cold, dark block to walk. But when they had reached the flat, and snapped on

lights everywhere, and cast off outer garments, aproned and busy, in the kitchen, she burst out:

"What on earth was the matter with that old lady, Aunt Kate?"

"Oh, I suppose they all eat too much, and sleep too much, and pamper themselves as if they were babies," her aunt returned, composedly, "and so it doesn't take much to upset 'em!"

"Oh, come now!" the girl said, stopping with arrested knife. "That wasn't what made her let out a yell like that!"

Mrs. Sheridan, kneeling at the oven of the gas stove, laughed uneasily.

"Oh, you could hear that, could you?"

"Hear it! They heard it in Yonkers."

"Well," Mrs. Sheridan said, "she has always been highstrung, that one. I remember years ago she'd be going into crying and raving fits. She's got very deep affections, Mrs. Melrose, and when she gets thinking of Theodore, and of Alice's accident, and this and that, she'll go right off the handle. She had been crying, poor soul, and suddenly she began this moaning and rocking. I told her I'd call someone if she didn't stop, for she'd go from bad to worse, with me."

"But why with you, Aunt Kate? Do you know her so well?"

"Do I know them?" Mrs. Sheridan dug an opener into a can of corn with a vigorous hand. "I know them all!"

"But how was that?" Norma persisted, now dropping her peeled potatoes into dancing hot water.

"I've told you five thousand times, but you and Rose would likely have one of your giggling fits on, and not a

word would you remember!" her aunt said. "I've told you that years ago, when your Uncle Tom died, and I was left with two babies, and not much money, a friend of mine, a milliner she was, told me that she knew a lady that wanted someone to help manage her affairs—household affairs. Well, I'd often helped your Uncle Tom with his books, and my mother was with me, to look out for the children——"

"Where was I, Aunt Kate?"

"You! Wolf wasn't but three, and Rose a year old—where would you be?"

"I was minus two years," Norma said, sententiously. "I was part of the cosmic all——"

"You be very careful how you talk about such things until you're a married woman!" her aunt said. "Salt those potatoes, darling. Norma, can you remember what I did with the corn that Rose liked so?"

Norma was attentive.

"You beat it up with eggs, and it came out a sort of puff," she recalled. "I know—you put a little cornstarch in, to give it body! Listen, Aunt Kate, how long did you stay with Mrs. Melrose?"

"Well, first I just watched her help for her, and paid the bills, and went to market. And then I got gradually managing more and more; I'd go to pay her interest, or deposit money, or talk to tenants; I liked it and she liked me. And then she talked me into going to France with her, but I cried all the way for my children, and I was glad enough to come home again! She and Miss Annie spent some time over there, but I came back. Miss Alice was in school, and Theodore—dear knows where he was—into some mischief somewhere! But I'd saved money, and she'd given me the Brooklyn

houses, and I took a boarder or two, and that was the last I ever worked for any one but my own!"

"Well, that's a nice girl, that Leslie," Norma said, "if her father *was* wild!"

"Her mother was a good girl," Kate said, "I knew her. But the old lady was proud, Baby—God save any one of us from pride like that! You'd never know it, to see her now, but she was very proud. Theodore's wife was a good girl, but she was Miss Annie's maid, and what Mrs. Melrose never could forgive was that when she ordered the girl out of the house, she showed her her wedding certificate. She was Mrs. Theodore Melrose, fast enough—though his mother never would see her or acknowledge her in any way."

"They must think the Lord has made a special arrangement for them—people like that!" Norma commented, turning a lovely flushed face from the pan where she was dexterously crisping bacon. "What business is it of hers if her son marries a working girl? That gives me a feeling akin to pain—just because she happens to have a lot of money! What does Miss Leslie Melrose think of that?"

"I don't know what she thinks—she loves her grandmother, I suppose. Mrs. Melrose took her in when she was only a tiny girl, and she's been the apple of her eye ever since. Theodore and his wife were divorced, and when Leslie was about four or five he came back to his mother to die—poor fellow! It was a terrible sorrow to the old lady—she'd had her share, one way and another! My goodness, Norma," Mrs. Sheridan interrupted herself to say, in half-reproachful appreciation, "I wish you'd always help me like this, my dear! You can be as useful as ten girls, when you've

a mind to! And then perhaps to-morrow you'll be as contrary——!"

"Oh, Aunt Kate, aren't you ashamed! When I ironed all your dish-towels last night, when you were setting bread, and I made the popovers Sunday!" Norma kissed her aunt, brushed a dab of cornstarch from the older woman's firm cheek, and performed a sort of erratic dance about the protestant and solid figure. "I'm a poor working girl," she said, "and I get dragged out with my long, hard day!"

"Well, God knows that's true, too," her aunt said, with a sudden look of compunction; "you may make a joke of it, but it's no life for a girl. My dear," she added, seriously, holding Norma with a firm arm, and looking into her eyes, "I hope I did no harm by what I did to-day! I did it for the best, whatever comes of it."

"You mean stirring up the whole thing?" Norma asked, frowning a little in curiosity and bewilderment. "Going to see her?"

"That—yes." Mrs. Sheridan rubbed her forehead with her hand, a fashion she had when puzzled or troubled, and suddenly resumed, with a great rattling of pans and hissing of water, her operations at the sink. "Well, nothing may come of it—we'll see!" she added, briskly. Norma, who was watching her expectantly, sighed disappointedly; the subject was too evidently closed. But a second later she was happily distracted by the slamming of the front door; Wolf and Rose Sheridan had come in together, and dinner was immediately served.

Norma recounted, with her own spirited embellishments, her adventures of the afternoon as the meal

progressed. She had had "fun" getting to the office in the first place, a man had helped her, and they had both skidded into another man, and bing!—they had all gone down on the ice together. And then at the shop nobody had come in, and the lights had been lighted, and the clerks had all gathered together and talked. Then Aunt Kate had come in to have lunch, and to have Norma go with her to the gas company's office about the disputed charge, and they had decided to make, at last, that long-planned call on the Melroses. There followed a description of the big house and the spoiled, pretty girl, and the impressive yet friendly old lady.

"And Aunt Kate—I'm sorry to say!—talked her into a nervous convulsion. You did, Aunt Kate—the poor old lady gave one piercing yell——"

"You awful girl, there'll be a judgment on you for your impudence!" her aunt said, fondly. But Rose looked solicitously at her mother, and said:

"Mother looks as if she had had a nervous convulsion, too. You look terribly tired, Mother!"

"Well, I had a little business to discuss with Mrs. Melrose," Mrs. Sheridan said, "and I'm no hand for business!"

"You know it!" Wolf Sheridan concurred, with his ready laugh. "Why didn't you send me?"

"It was her business, lovey," his mother said, mildly, over her second heartening cup of strong black tea.

The Sheridan apartment was, in exterior at least, exactly like one hundred thousand others that line the side streets of New York. It faced the familiar grimy street, fringed on the great arteries each side by cigarette stands and saloons, and it was entered

by the usual flight of stained and shabby steps, its doorway showing a set of some dozen letter-boxes, and looking down upon a basement entrance frequently embellished with ash-cans and milk-bottles, and, just at present, with banks of soiled and sooty snow. The Sheridans climbed three long flights inside, to their own rooms, but as this gained them a glimpse of river, and a sense in summer of airiness and height, to say nothing of pleasant nearness to the roof, they rarely complained of the stairs—in fact, rarely thought of them at all.

With the opening of their own door, however, all likeness to their neighbours ceased. Even in a class where home ties and home comforts are far more common than is generally suspected, Kate Sheridan was exceptional, and her young persons fortunate among their kind. Her training had been, she used to tell them, "old country" training, but it was not only in fresh linen and hot, good food that their advantage lay. It was in the great heart that held family love a divine gift, that had stood between them and life's cold realities for some twenty courageous years. Kate idolized her own two children and her foster-child with a passion that is the purest and the strongest in the world. In possessing them, she thought herself the most blessed of women. To keep a roof over their heads, to watch them progress triumphantly through long division and measles and skates, to see milk glasses emptied and plates scraped, to realize that Wolf was as strong morally as he was physically, and that all her teachers called Rose an angel, to spoil and adore the beautiful, mischievous, and amusing "Baby"; this made a life full to the brim, for Kate, of pride and

happiness. Kate had never had a servant, or a fur coat; for long intervals she had not had a night's unbroken rest; and there had been times, when Wolf's fractured arm necessitated a doctor's bill, or when coal for the little Detroit house had made a disproportionate hole in her bank account, in which even the thrifty Kate had known biting financial worry.

But the children never knew it. They knew only her law of service and love. They must love each other, whatever happened. There was no quarrelling at meals at Kate's house. Rose must of course oblige her brother, sew on the button, or take his book to the library; Wolf must always protect the girls, and consider them. Wolf firmly believed his sister and cousin to be the sweetest girls in the world; Rose and Norma regarded Wolf as perfection in human form. They rarely met without embraces, never without brightening eyes and light hearts.

That this attitude toward each other was only the result of the healthy bodies and honest souls that Kate had given them they would hardly have believed. That her resolute training had literally forced them to love and depend upon themselves in a world where brothers and sisters as habitually teased and annoyed each other, would have struck them as fantastic. Perhaps Kate herself hardly knew the power of her own will upon them. Her commands in their babyhood had not been couched in the language of modern child-analysts, nor had she given, or been able to give, any particular reason for her law. But the instinct by which she drew Wolf's attention to his sister's goodness, or noted Wolf's cleverness for Rose's benefit, was better than any reason. She summed the

situation up simply for the few friends she had, with the phrase:

"They're all crazy about each other, every one of them!"

Kate's parlour would have caused Annie von Behrens actual faintness. But it was a delightful place to Rose and Wolf and their friends. The cushioned divan on Sunday nights customarily held a row of them, the upright ebony piano sifted popular music impartially upon the taboret, the patent rocker, and the Rover rug. They laughed, gossiped, munched candy, and experimented in lovemaking quite as happily as did Leslie and her own intimates. They streamed out into the streets, and sauntered along under the lights to the moving pictures, or on hot summer nights they perched like tiers of birds on the steps, and the world and youth seemed sweet to them. In Kate's dining-room, finished in black wood and red paper, they made Welsh rarebits and fudge, and in Kate's spotless kitchen odours of toast and coffee rose at unseemly hours.

Lately, Rose and Norma had been talking of changes. Rose was employed in an office whose severe and beautiful interior decoration had cost thousands of dollars, and Norma's Old Book Room was a study in dull carved woods, Oriental rugs, dull bronzes, and flawless glass. The girls began to feel that a plain cartridge paper and net curtains might well replace the parlour's florid green scrolling and Nottingham lace. But they did not worry about it; it served as a topic to amuse their leisure hours. The subject was generally routed by a shrewd allusion, from Norma or Wolf, to the sort of parlour people would like if they got married, married

to someone who was doing very well in the shoe business, for example.

These allusions deepened the colour in Rose's happy face; she had been "going" for some three months with an attractive young man who exactly met these specifications—not her first admirer, not noticeable for any especial quality, yet Rose and Norma, and Kate, too, felt in their souls that Rose's hour had come. Young Harry Redding was a big, broad, rather inarticulate fellow, whose humble calling was not the more attractive to the average young woman because he supported his mother by it. But he suited Rose, more, he seemed wonderful to Rose, and because her dreams had always been humble and self-sacrificing, Harry was a thousand times more than she had dreamed. She felt herself the luckiest girl in the world.

Kate sat at the head of her table, and Wolf at the foot. Rose, a gentle, quiet copy of her handsome mother, was nearest the kitchen door, to which she made constant flying trips. Norma was opposite Rose, and by falling back heavily could tip her entire chair against the sideboard, from which she extracted forks or salt or candy, as the case might be. The telephone was in the dining-room, Wolf's especial responsibility, and Mrs. Sheridan herself occasionally left the table for calls to the front door or the dumbwaiter.

To-night, after supper, the girls flew through their share of clearing-up. It never weighed very heavily upon them; they usually began the process of piling and scraping dishes before they left the table, Rose whisking the tablecloth into its drawer as Norma bumped through the swinging door with the last dishes, and Kate halfway through the washing even then.

Chattering and busy, they hustled the hot plates onto their shelves, rattled the hot plated ware into its basket, clanked saucepans, and splashed water. Not fifteen minutes after the serving of the dessert the last signs of the meal had been obliterated, and Kate was guilty of what the girls called "making excuses" to linger in the kitchen. She was mixing cereal, storing cold potatoes and cut bread, soaking dish-towels. But these things did not belong to the duties of Norma and Rose, and the younger girl could flash with a free conscience to the little room she shared with Rose. Wolf had called out for a companion, they were going to take a walk and see what the blizzard had done!

Norma washed her face, the velvety skin emerging with its bloom untouched, the lips crimson, the blue eyes blazing. She pressed a great wave of silky dark hair across her white forehead, and put the fur-trimmed hat at a dashing angle. The lace blouse, the pearl beads, her fur-collared coat again, and Norma was ready to dance out beside Wolf as if fatigue and labours did not exist.

"Where's Rose?" he said, as they went downstairs.

"Oh, Wolf—Saturday night! Harry's coming, of course!" Norma slipped her little hand, in its shabby glove, through his big arm. "She and Aunt Kate were gossiping!"

"Suits me!" Wolf said, contentedly. He held her firmly on the slippery lumps of packed snow. The sidewalks were almost impassable, yet hundreds of other happy persons were stumbling and scrambling over them in the mild winter darkness. Stars were out; and whether Norma was blinking up at them, or staring into lighted windows of candy stores and fruit

markets, her own eyes danced and twinkled. The elevated trains thundered above their heads, and the subway roared under their feet; great advertising signs, with thousands of coloured lights, fanned up and down in a haze of pink and blue; the air was full of voices, laughing and shouting, and the screaming of coasting children.

"I have my pearls on," Norma told her companion. They stopped for some molasses peppermints, and their pungent odour mingled for Norma in the impression of this happy hour. "Wolf, how do they do that?" the girl asked, watching an electric sign on which a maid mopped a dirty floor with some prepared cleaner, leaving the floor clean after her mop. Wolf, interested, explained, and Norma listened. They stopped at a drug store, and studied a picture that subtly altered from Roosevelt's face to Lincoln's, and thence to Wilson's face, and Wolf explained that, too. Norma knew that he understood everything of that nature, but she liked to impress him, too, and did so far more often than she realized, with her book-lore. When Norma spoke lightly of a full calf edition de luxe of the Sonnets from the Portuguese, she might almost have been speaking in that language for all she conveyed to Wolf, but he watched the animated face proudly just the same. Rose had always been good and steady and thoughtful, but Wolf knew that Norma was clever, taking his big-brotherly patronage with admiring awe, but daring where he hesitated, and boldly at home where he was ill at ease. When she said that when she got married she wanted Dedham china, and just a plain, glass bowl for goldfish, Wolf nodded, but he would have nodded just as placidly if she had

wanted a Turkish corner and bead portières. And to-night when she asserted that she wouldn't be Leslie Melrose for anything in the world, Wolf asked in simple wonderment why she should be.

"Imagine, a maid came to take those big girls home, Wolf! They can speak French," Norma confided. Wolf did not look for coherence from her, and took the two statements on their face value. "Now, I know I'm not pretty," she continued, following, as was usual with her, some obscure line of thought, "but I'm prettier than Doris Alexander, and she had her picture in the paper!"

"Who broke it to you that you're not pretty?" Wolf asked.

"Well, I *know* I'm not!" Norma jumped along at his side for a few minutes, eyeing him expectantly, but Wolf's mind was honestly busy with this assertion, and he did not speak. Wasn't she pretty? Girls had funny standards. "You know," she resumed, "you'd hate a girl like Leslie Melrose, Wolf!"

"Would I?"

"Oh, you'd loathe her. But I'll tell you who you *would* like," Norma added, in a sudden burst. "You'd love Mr. Liggett!"

"Why should I?" Wolf asked, in some surprise.

"Oh, because he's nice—he's very good-looking, and he has such a pleasant voice, as if he knew everything, but wasn't a bit conceited!" Norma said. "And he picks out books for his wife, and when I try to tell him something about them, he always knows lots more. You know, in a pleasant, careless sort of way, not a bit as if he was showing off. And I'll tell you what he did. Miss Drake was showing him a pottery

bowl one day, and she dropped it, and she told me he sort of caught at it with his hand, and he said to Mr. Biretta, 'I've very stupidly broken this—just put it on my bill, will you?' Of course," Norma added, vivaciously, "old B. G. immediately said that it was nothing at all, but *you know* what Miss Drake would have caught, if *she'd* broken it!"

Perhaps Wolf did, but he was thinking at the moment that the family baby was very cunning, with her bright eyes and indignant mouth. He stopped her before a vaudeville house, in a flare of bright light.

"Want to go in?"

"Oh, Wolf! Would Aunt Kate care? Oh, Wolf, *let's!*"

There was absolute ecstasy in her eyes as they went through the enchanted doorway and up the rising empty foyer toward the house. It was nine o'clock; the performance was fairly under way. Norma rustled into a seat beside her companion without moving her eyes from the coloured comedian on the stage; she could remove hat and gloves and jacket without losing an instant of him.

When the lights went up Wolf approved the dark hair and the pearls, and bent toward her to hear the unending confidences. Norma thought she had never seen anything better, and even Wolf admitted that it was a good show. They finished the peppermints, and were very happy.

They had seen the big film, and so could cut the last third of the programme, and reach home at ten o'clock. There was no comment from Aunt Kate, who was yawning over the evening paper in the dining-room. Rose and Harry were murmuring in the dimly lighted

parlour. Wolf, who was of the slow-thinking, intense type that discovers a new world every time it reads a new book, was halfway through a shabby library copy of "War and Peace," and went off to his room with the second volume under his arm. Norma went to her room, too, but she sat dreaming before the mirror, thinking of that Melrose house, and of Leslie's friendliness, until Rose came in at eleven o'clock.

CHAPTER III

At almost this same moment Norma's self was the subject of a rather unusual talk between Christopher Liggett and his wife.

Christopher had come softly into his house, at about half-past ten, to find Alice awake, still on the big couch before her fire. Her little bedroom beyond was softly lighted, the white bed turned down, and the religious books she always read before going to sleep laid in place by Miss Slater. But Alice had no light except her fire and two or three candles in old sconces.

She welcomed Christopher with a smile, and he sat down, in his somewhat rumpled evening dress, and smiled back at her in a rather weary fashion. He often told her that these rooms of hers were a sanctuary, that he tested the men and women he met daily in the world by her fine and lofty standard. It was part of his utter generosity to her that he talked to her as frankly as if he thought aloud, and it was Alice's pride and joy to know that this marriage of theirs, which had so sadly and suddenly become no marriage at all, was not as one-sided as the world might have suspected. Her clear, dispassionate viewpoint and her dignified companionship were not wifehood, but they were dear and valuable to him none the less, a part of his life that he would not have spared. And he could still admire her, too, not only for the exquisite clearness of her intellect, her French and Italian, her

knowledge of countries and affairs, but physically—the clear, childish forehead that was as unwrinkled as Leslie's, the fair, beautifully brushed hair, the mouth with its chiselling of wisdom and of pain, and the transparent hand from which she shook back transparent laces. She was always proud, always fresh and fragrant, always free for him and for his problems, and it was proverbial in the circle of their intimates that Chris admired Alice with all his heart, and never felt himself anything but the privileged guardian of a treasure.

To-night he dropped into a chair before her fire, and she watched him for five or six restful minutes in silence.

"Stupid dinner?" she ventured.

"Rotten!" he answered, cheerfully. "I was late, but I got in to hear Hendrick's speech. The Vice-President was there, everyone else I knew. I cut away finally; I'm done up."

"I thought you picked up Hendrick on your way and went together," Mrs. Liggett said, sympathetically. "I'm sorry it was dull—I suppose men have to go to these political things!"

Chris was leaning forward, his locked hands dropped between his knees, and his eyes on the fire.

"Hendrick and I stopped at your mother's," he said, deliberately, "and she was so upset that I sent Hendrick on alone!"

Alice's eyes lighted apprehensively, but she spoke very quietly.

"What was it, Chris? Leslie getting saucy?"

"Oh, no, no! It was a complication of things, I imagine!" Christopher took out his cigarette-case, looked at its moiré surface reflectively, and selected a

smoke. "She was tired—she'd been out in the snow—Leslie had gone off with Annie to some débutante affair—I daresay she felt blue. Alice, do you remember a woman named Kate Sheridan?"

The question was sudden, and Alice blinked.

"Yes, I do," she answered, after a moment's thought, "she was a sort of maid or travelling companion of Mama's. We called her Mrs. Sheridan—she was quite a superior sort of person."

"What do you remember about her, dear?"

"Well—just that. She came when I was only a child—and then when Annie was ill in Paris she went abroad with Mama—and I remember that she came back, and she used to come see me at school, for Mama, and once she took me up to Grandma's, in Brookline. She was a widow, and she had a child—or two, maybe. Why, Chris?"

Her husband did not answer, and she repeated the question.

"Well," he said, at last, flinging the end of his cigarette into the fire, "she came to see your mother to-day."

Alice waited, a little at a loss. To her this had no particular significance.

"She had her niece with her, young girl about eighteen," Christopher said.

"Well—what *of* it?" Alice demanded, with a sort of superb indifference to anything such a woman might do.

He looked at her through his round eyeglasses, with the slight frown that many of life's problems brought to his handsome face. Then the glass fell, on its black ribbon, and he laughed.

"That's just what I don't *get*," he said, good-

humouredly. "But I'll tell you exactly what occurred. What's-His-Name, your mother's butler——"

"Joseph."

"Joseph. Joseph told me that at about four o'clock this Mrs. Sheridan came in. Your mother had told him that she was expecting the lady, and that he was to bring her upstairs. With her came this girl—I can't remember her name—but it was something Sheridan—Nora Sheridan, maybe. Leslie carried the girl off for tea, and the woman stayed with your mother.

"Well, at five—or later, this Mrs. Sheridan ran into the hall, and it seems—she's all right now!—it seems that your mother had fainted."

"Mama!" Alice said, anxiously, with an incredulous frown.

"Yes, but don't worry. She's absolutely all right now. Leslie," Christopher went back to his narrative, "Leslie cried, and I suppose there was a scene. Mrs. Sheridan and the girl went home—Leslie dressed and went out—and your mother immediately telephoned Lee——"

"Judge Lee?"

"Yes—she said so. Lee's up in Westchester with his daughter, she couldn't get him——"

"But, Chris, why did she want her lawyer?"

"That's just it—*why?* Well, then she telephoned here for me—I was on my way there, as it happened, and just before eight Hendrick and I went in. I could see she was altogether up stage, so I sent Von on and had it out with her."

"And what was her explanation, Chris?"

Christopher laughed again.

"I'll be darned," he said, thoughtfully, "if I can make

head or tail of it! It would be funny if it wasn't that she's taking it so hard. She was in bed, and she had been crying—wouldn't eat any dinner——"

"But, Chris," Alice said, worriedly, "what do you *make* of it! What did she *say?*"

"Well, she clasped my hand, and she said that she had an opportunity to undo a great wrong—and that I must help her—and not ask any questions—she was just acting as you and I would have her act under the circumstances——"

"What circumstances?" Alice said, at an utter loss, as he paused.

"She didn't say," he smiled.

"Oh, come, now, Chris, she must have said more than that!"

"No, she didn't. She said that she must make it up to this girl, and she wished to see Lee about it immediately."

"To change her will!" Alice exclaimed.

"She didn't say so. Of course, it may be some sort of blackmail." Christopher looked whimsically at his wife. "As I remember my father-in-law," he said, "it seems to me improbable that out of the past could come this engaging young girl—very pretty, they said——"

"Father! Oh, nonsense!" Alice exclaimed, almost in relief at the absurdity. "No, but it might be some business—some claim against the firm," she suggested.

"Well, I thought of that. But there are one or two reasons why it doesn't seem the solution. I asked your mother if it was money, and she said no, said it positively and repeatedly. Then I asked her if she would like this Sheridan woman shut up, and she

was quite indignant. Kate!—Kate was one of the most magnificent women God had ever made, and so on!"

"Well, I do remember Mrs. Sheridan as a lovely sort of person," Alice contributed. "Plain, you know, but quite wonderful for—well, *goodness*. It's funny—but then you know Mama is terribly excitable," she added, "she gets frightfully worked up over nothing, or almost nothing. It's quite possible that when Kate recalled old times to her she suddenly wished that she had done more for Kate—something like that. She'd think nothing of sending for Judge Lee on the spot. You remember her recalling us from our wedding-trip because she couldn't find the pearls? All the way from Lake Louise to hear that they had been lost!"

"I know," Christopher smiled. "She is—unique, *ma belle mère*. By George, I'll never forget our rushing into the house like maniacs, not knowing what had happened to Leslie or Acton, and having her fall sobbing into your arms, with the pearls in her hands!"

"Mama's wonderful," Alice laughed. "Chris, did you eat any dinner?"

He considered.

"But I'm really not hungry, dear," he protested.

Alice, superbly incredulous, rang at once. Who was in the kitchen? Well, she was to be asked to send up a tray at once to Mr. Liggett. "Now that you asked me, the dinner had reached the point of ice-cream in a paper tub, as I sat down," he remembered. "You're a little miracle of healing to me, Alice. When I came in here I didn't know *what* we were up against, as a family. Your mother wished the girl pensioned——"

"Oh, Chris, not really?"

"I give you my word!" But he was enough his usual self to have taken his seat at the piano, now, and was looking at her across it, while his fingers fitted themselves lazily to chords and harmonics.

"I'll tell you something, if you'll promise to stop playing the instant your supper comes up!"

"I'll promise!"

"Well, then—the new Puccini is there!" She nodded toward the music-shelves, and he turned to the new score with an eager exclamation. Fifteen minutes later she had to scold him to bring him to the fire again, and to the smoking little supper. While Alice sipped ginger ale, Christopher fell upon his meal, and they discussed the probable presentation of the opera, and its quality.

But an hour later, when she was in bed, and Christopher was going back to the piano for another half-hour of music, she caught his hand.

"Chris, you're not worried about this Sheridan matter?"

"Worried? No, dearest child, what is there to worry about? It isn't blackmail, apparently it's nothing but an overdose of imagination on your mother's part. If the girl really was promised something, or has—for example!—old stock, or if her father was an employee who did this or that or the other—Mrs. Sheridan's husband was employed by your father at the time of his death, by the way—why, it's easy enough to pay the claim, whatever it is! The girl seems to have made a nice impression—your mother tells me she's sold me books, but that doesn't mean much, I buy books everywhere! No, I don't think you'll ever hear of her again. But your mother will

be here in a day or two; see what you can make of it all!"

"Oh, of course, it's nothing *wrong!*" Alice said, confidently.

And Christopher returned to his beloved piano, relieved in mind by his wife's counsel, refreshed in body by the impromptu supper, and ready for the music that soothed in him all the restless and unsatisfied fibres of his soul.

CHAPTER IV

ANNIE, who signed herself "Anne Melrose von Behrens," was the real dictator in the various circles of the allied families, and had a fashion of finding herself supreme in larger circles, as well. Annie was thirty-seven or eight, tall, thin, ash-blonde, superb in manner and bearing. Nature had been generous to her, but she had done far more for herself than Nature had. Her matchless skin, her figure, her hands, her voice, were all the result of painstaking and intelligent care. Annie had been a headstrong, undisciplined girl twenty years ago. She had come back from a European visit, at twenty-three, with a vague if general reputation of being "a terror." But Annie was clever, and she had real charm. She spoke familiarly of European courts, had been presented even in inaccessible Vienna. She spoke languages, quoted poets, had great writers and painters for her friends, and rippled through songs that had been indisputably dedicated, in flowing foreign hands, to the beautiful Mademoiselle Melrose. Society bowed before Annie; she was the sensation of her winter, and the marriage she promptly made was the most brilliant in many winters.

Annie proceeded to bear her sober, fine, dull, and devoted Hendrick two splendid sons, and thus riveted to herself his lasting devotion and trust. The old name was safe, the millions would descend duly to

young Hendrick and Piet. The family had been rich, conspicuous, and respected in the city, since its sturdy Holstein cattle had browsed along the fields of lower Broadway, but under Annie's hands it began to shine. Annie's handsome motor-cars bore the family arms, her china had been made in the ancestral village, two miles from Rotterdam, and also carried the shield. Her city home, in Fifth Avenue, was so magnificent, so chastely restrained and sober, so sternly dignified, that it set the cue for half the other homes of the ultra-aristocratic set. Annie's servants had been in the Von Behrens family for years; there was nothing in the Avenue house, or the Newport summer home, that was not as handsome, as old, as solid, as carven, as richly dull, or as purely shining, as human ingenuity could contrive to have it. Collectors saved their choicest discoveries for Annie; and there was no painter in the new world who would not have been proud to have Annie place a canvas of his among her treasures from the old.

If family relics were worth preserving, what could be more remarkable than Annie's Washington letter, her Jefferson tray, her Gainsboroughs of the Murisons who had been the only Americans so honoured by the painter? Melrose and Von Behrens honours crowded each other—here was the thin old silver "shepherdess" cup awarded that Johanna von Behrens who had won a prize with her sheep, while Washington was yet a boy; and here the quaint tortoise-shell snuff-box that a great prince, homeless and unknown, had given the American family that took him in; and the silver buttons from Lafayette's waistcoat that the great Frenchman had presented Colonel Horace Murison of the "Continentals."

These things were not thrust at the visitor, nor indeed were they conspicuous among the thousand other priceless souvenirs that Annie had gathered about her.

"Rather nice, isn't it?" Annie would say, abstractedly, when some enthusiastic girl pored over the colonial letters or the old portraits. "See here, Margaret," she might add, casually, "do you see the inside of this little slipper, my dear? Read what's written there: 'In these slippers Deborah Murison danced with Governor Winthrop, on the night of her fifteenth birthday, July 1st, 1742.' Isn't that rather quaint?"

Annie could afford to be casual, to be abstracted. In her all the pride of the Melrose and Murison families was gathered; hers was an arrogance so sure of itself, a self-confidence so supreme, that the world questioned it no more than it questioned the heat of the sun. The old silver, the Copleys, and the colonial china, the Knickerbocker "court chests" with their great locks of Dutch silver, and the laces that had been shown at the Hague two hundred years before, were all confirmed, all reinforced, as it were, by the power and prosperity of to-day. It was no by-gone glory that made brilliant the lives of Hendrick and Anne Melrose von Behrens. Hendrick's cousins and uncles, magnificent persons of title, were prominent in Holland to-day, their names associated with that of royalty, and their gracious friendship extended to the American branch of the family whenever Hendrick chose to claim it. Old maps of New York bore the boundary lines of the Von Behrens farm; early histories of the city mingled the names of Melrose and Von Behrens among those of the men who had served the public need.

Wherever there was needed that tone that only names of prominence and wealth can bestow Annie's name was solicited. Wherever it appeared it gave the instant stamp of dignity and integrity. She had seen this goal dimly in the distance, when she stepped from her rather spoiled and wilful girlhood into this splendid wifehood, but even Annie was astonished at the rapidity with which it had come about. Mama, of course, had known all the right people, even if she *had* dropped all social ties after Papa's death. And Hendrick's name was an open sesame. But even so it was surprising, and it was gratifying.

In appearance Annie had no problem. If she was not a beauty she was near enough to being one. She was smart enough, and blonde enough, and splendidly dressed enough to be instantly identifiable, and that was all she desired. Financially, Annie had no problem. Her own inheritance and her husband's great wealth silenced all question there. The Murison pearls and the famous diamond tiara that her father had given her mother years ago had come to Annie, but they were eclipsed by the Von Behrens family jewels, and these were all hers, with the laces, and the ivories, and the brocades. Life could give nothing more to Annie, but not many women would have made so much of what Annie had. There was, far down and out of sight, a little streak of the adventuress in her, and she never stopped halfway.

A young wife, Annie had dutifully considered her nursery.

"Hendrick's is the elder line, of course, although it is the colonial one," Annie had said, superintending a princely layette. The child was a son, his father's

image, and nobody who knew Annie was in the least surprised that fortune had fallen in with her plans. It was the magnificent Annie who was quoted as telling Madame Modiste to give her a fitter who would not talk; it was Annie who decided what should be done in recognizing the principals of the Jacqmain divorce, and that old Floyd Densmore's actress-wife should not be accepted. Annie's neat and quiet answer to a certain social acquaintance who remarked, in Annie's little gallery, "I have seen the original of that picture, in one of the European galleries," was still quoted by Annie's friends. "This *is* the original!" Annie had said quite simply and truthfully.

Leslie admired her aunt more than any one else in the world. Grandma was old-fashioned, and Aunt Alice insignificant, in Leslie's eyes, but stunning, arrogant, fearless Aunt Annie was the model upon which she would have based herself if she had known how. Annie's quick positiveness with her servants, her cool friendliness with big men, and clever men, her calm assurance as to which hats she liked, and which hats she didn't, her utter belief in everything that was of Melrose or von Behrens, and her calm contempt for everything that was not, were masterly in Leslie's eyes.

Annie might have been a strong royalist had she been born a few generations earlier. But in Annie's day the ideal of social service had been laid down by fashion, and she was consequently a tremendously independent and energetic person, with small time for languishing airs. She headed committees and boards, knew hundreds of working girls by name, kept a secretary and a stenographer, and mentioned topics at big dinners that would not have shocked either old

Goodwife Melrose of Boston, or Vrouw von Behrens of Nieu Amsterdam, for neither had the faintest idea that such things, or their names, existed.

Withal, Annie was attractive, even her little affectations were impressive, and as she went about from luncheons to meetings, swept up to her model nursery to revel in her model boys, tossed aside regal furs and tore off princely rings the better to play with them, wrapped her beautiful figure in satins and jewels to descend to formal dinners, she was almost as much admired and envied and copied as she might fondly have hoped to be. She managed her life on modern lines of efficiency, planned ahead what she wished, tutored herself not to think of anything undesirable as being even in the range of possibility, trod lightly upon the sensitive souls of others, and asked no quarter herself, aimed high, and enjoyed her life and its countless successes to the full.

Of course there had been setbacks. Her brother Theodore, his most unfortunate marriage to a servant, his intemperance, the general scandal of his mother's violent detestation of his wife, all this was most unpleasant. But Louison, the wife, upon sufficient pressure, had brought her child to the Melroses, and had doubtfully disappeared, and Theodore had returned from his wanderings to live, silent and unobtrusive, in his mother's home, for several years, and to die with his daughter beside him, and be duly laid in the Melrose plot at Woodlawn. And Leslie—Leslie had repaid them all, for all of it.

Alice was another disappointment, or had been one, to Annie. For Alice, after having achieved a most unexpectedly satisfactory marriage, and having set

up her household gods in the very shadow of her sister's brilliant example, as it were, had met with that most unfortunate accident. For a few years Annie had been utterly exasperated whenever she thought of it. For Christopher was really an extraordinary husband for Alice to hold, even in normal circumstances. He was so outrageously, frightfully, irresistibly popular with women everywhere, his wife must needs keep a very sharp, albeit loving, eye upon him. A sickly wife—a wife who was a burden and a reproach, that would be fatal to them all!

But Alice had showed unsuspected courage and pride in this hard trial. She had made herself beautiful, well-informed, tactful; she had made herself a magnet to her husband's friends, and his home the centre of a real social group. Annie respected her for it, and helped her by flashing into her rooms not less often than every alternate day, with gossip, with books, with hints that showed Alice just where her course in this or that matter must lie.

So Alice had come to be an actual asset, and now to her Aunt Annie's tremendous satisfaction, Leslie promised to add one more feather to the family cap by announcing her engagement to Acton Liggett. Annie smiled to herself whenever she thought of it. When this was consummated she would have nothing left but the selection of suitable wives for Hendrick Junior, now aged ten, and Piet, who was four years younger.

Two or three days after the ending of the big snowstorm, and the beginning of that domestic storm that was destined strangely to change some of the lives nearest her, Annie went in to have luncheon with her

sister. It was a brilliant sunshiny winter day, with crossings swimming in melting snow and roofs steaming brightly into the clear air.

Annie went straight upstairs to Alice's room, with the usual apology for lateness. She kissed Alice lightly on the forehead, and while Freda was coming and going with their meal, they discussed the little boys, books, politics, and the difficulties of the city in the snow.

But when they were alone Annie asked immediately:

"What on earth is the matter with Mama, Alice?"

"You mean about——? Did she tell you?"

"No; she didn't have to. Leslie ran in yesterday afternoon, and told me that Mama has been in bed since Saturday! I telephoned Sunday morning, but Hendrick and I were taking the boys up to his uncle's house, in Westchester, and—as she didn't say one word about being ill—I didn't see her that day, nor yesterday, as it happened, for we didn't come down until noon. When Leslie came in, there were other people there for tea, and I didn't have a chance to speak to her alone. But I went over to Mama this morning, and she seems all broken up!"

"What did she tell you?" Alice asked, anxiously.

"Oh, my dear, you know Mama! She wept, and patted my hand, and said that it was sad to be the last of your own generation, and she hoped you and I would always have each other, and that she had always loved us, and tried to do her best for us——"

Alice laughed.

"Poor Mama! She gets so worked up!" she said.

"But what do you make of it?" demanded Annie. "She talked of this Kate Sheridan—I remember her

perfectly, she came to Paris when I was so ill, years ago. Poor Mama cried, and said that she wished to do something for Kate. Now you know, Alice," Annie went on reasonably, "nobody is tying Mama's hands! If she wants to educate this young girl—this Norma person—to please Kate, or all her children for that matter, she doesn't have to go into hysterics, and send for Judge Lee. She said she didn't feel at all well, and she wanted to secure to Kate some money in her will. I told her it was ridiculous—she never looked better in her life! I wish she could get over to see you, Alice; you always soothe her so. What on earth does Chris make of it?"

"Well, I'll tell you what we've done," Alice smiled. "Chris went to see her Sunday, and they had a long talk. He tells me that she was just as vague and unsatisfactory as ever, but calmer, and she finally admitted that all she really wanted to do was to befriend this niece of Kate Sheridan. Of course Chris and I think Mama has one of her funny notions about it, but if the child's mother had befriended Mama, for example, a thousand years ago, or if Mama had borrowed five dollars from Kate, and forgotten to return it, you know that would be enough to account for all this excitement."

"Yes, I know!" Annie admitted, with her favourite look of intolerant, yet indulgent, scorn.

"Well, it seems the girl is in Biretta's Bookshop, and Chris has often bought books of her. So to quiet Mama he promised that he would bring her out here to have tea with me some day soon. Mama was delighted, and I think she hopes that a friendship will come of it." Alice threw herself back into the

pillows, and drew a great breath as if she were weary. "I only want to please Mama!" she finished.

"You're an angel," Annie said, absently. "I suppose I could get the truth out of Mama in five seconds," she mused. "It looks to me rather like blackmail!"

"No; she said not!" Alice contradicted, quickly.

"Well, it's all so silly," the elder sister said, impatiently. "And coming just now——" she added, significantly.

"Yes. I know!" Alice agreed, with a comprehending look. And in lowered tones they began to talk of Leslie's possible engagement.

CHAPTER V

NORMA SHERIDAN saw the engagement announced in a morning paper two weeks later, and carried the picture of pretty Miss Melrose home, to entertain the dinner table. The news had been made known at a dinner given to forty young persons, in the home of the débutante's aunt, Mrs. Hendrick von Behrens. Miss Melrose, said the paper, was the daughter and heiress of the late Theodore Melrose, and made her home with her grandmother. Mr. Liggett was the brother of Christopher Liggett, whose marriage to Miss Alice Melrose was a social event some years ago. A number of dinners and dances were already planned in honour of the young pair.

Norma looked at the pictured face with a little stir of feelings so confused that she could not define them, at her heart. But she passed the paper to her aunt with no comment.

"You might send them two dozen kitchen towels, Mother," Wolf suggested, drily, and Rose laughed joyously. Her own engagement present from her mother had been this extremely practical one, and Rose loved to open her lower bureau drawer, and gloat over the incredible richness of possessing twenty-four smooth, red-striped, well-hemmed glass-towels, all her own. Norma had brought her two thick, dull gray Dedham bowls, with ducks waddling around them, and these were in the drawer, too, wrapped in tissue paper. And

beside these were the length of lemon-coloured silk that Rose had had for a year, without making up, and six of her mother's fine sheets of Irish linen, and two glass candlesticks that Rose had won at a Five-hundred party. Altogether, Rose felt that she was making great strides toward home-making, especially as she and Harry must wait for months, perhaps a year. Norma had promised her two towels a month, until there were a whole dozen, and Wolf, prompted by the same generous little heart, told her not to give the gas-stove a thought, for she was to have the handsomest one that money could buy, with a stand-up oven and a water-heater, from her brother. Rose walked upon air.

But Norma was in a mood that she herself seemed unable to understand or to combat. She felt a constant inclination toward tears. She didn't hate the Melroses—no, they had been most friendly and kind. But—but it was a funny world in which one girl had everything, like Leslie, and another girl had no brighter prospect than to drudge away in a bookstore all her life, or to go out on Sundays with her cousin. Norma dreamed for hours of Leslie's life, the ease and warmth and beauty of it, and when Leslie was actually heralded as engaged the younger girl felt a pang of the first actual jealousy she had ever known. She imagined the beautiful drawing-room in which Acton Liggett—perhaps as fascinating a person as his brother!—would clasp pearls about Leslie's fair little throat; she imagined the shining dinner tables at which Leslie's modestly dropped blonde head would be stormed with compliments and congratulations.

And suddenly molasses peppermints and dish-

washing became odious to her, and she almost disliked Rose for her pitiable ecstasies over china bowls and glass-towels. All the pleasant excitement of her call upon Mrs. Melrose, with Aunt Kate, died away. It had seemed the beginning of some vaguely dreamed-of progress toward a life of beauty and achievement, but it was two weeks ago now, and its glamour was fading.

True, Christopher Liggett had come into Biretta's bookstore, with Leslie, and he and Norma had talked together for a few minutes, and Leslie had extended her Aunt Alice's kind invitation for tea. But no day had been set for the tea, Norma reflected gloomily. Now, she supposed, the stir of Leslie's engagement would put all that out of Christopher's head.

Wolf was not particularly sympathetic with her, she mused, disconsolately. Wolf had been acting in an unprecedented manner of late. Rose's engagement seemed to have completely turned his head. He laughed at Norma, hardly heard her words when she spoke to him, and never moved his eyes from her when they were together. Norma could not look up from her book, or her plate, or from the study of a Broadway shop window, without encountering that same steady, unembarrassed, half-puzzled stare.

"What's the matter with you, Wolf?" she would ask, impatiently. But Wolf never told her.

As a matter of fact, he did not know. He was a silent, thoughtful fellow, old for his years in many ways, and in some still a boy. Norma and Rose had known only the more prosperous years of Kate's life, but Wolf remembered many a vigil with his mother, remembered her lonely struggles to make a living for him and for the girls. He himself was the type that inevitably prospers

—industrious, good, intelligent, and painstaking, but as a young boy in the working world he had early seen the terrors in the lives of men about him: drink, dirt, unemployment and disease, debt and dishonour. Wolf was not quick of thought; he had little imagination, rather marvelling at other men's cleverness than displaying any of his own, and he had reached perhaps his twenty-second or twenty-third summer before he realized that these terrors did not menace him, that whatever changes he made in his work would be improvements, steps upward. For actual months after the move to New York Wolf had pondered it, in quiet gratitude and pleasure. Rent and bills could be paid, there might be theatre treats for the girls, and chicken for Sunday supper, and yet the savings account in the Broadway bank might grow steadily, too. Far from being a slave to his employer, Wolf began to realize that this rather simple person was afraid of him, afraid that young Sheridan and some of the other smart, ingenious, practically educated men in his employ might recognize too soon their own independence.

And when the second summer in New York came, and Wolf could negotiate the modest financial deal that gave him and the girls a second-hand motor-car to cruise about in on Sundays and holidays, when they could picnic up in beautiful Connecticut, or unpack the little fringed red napkins far down on the Long Island shore, life had begun to seem very pleasant to him. Debt and dirt and all the squalid horrors of what he had seen, and what he had read, had faded from his mind, and for awhile he had felt that his cup could hold no more.

But now, just lately, there was something else, and al-

though the full significance of it had not yet actually dawned upon him, Wolf began to realize that a change was near. It was the most miraculous thing that had ever come to him, although it concerned only little Norma—only the little cousin who had been an actual member of his family for all these years.

He had heard his mother say a thousand times that she was pretty; he had laughed himself a thousand times at her quick wit. But he had never dreamed that it would make his heart come up into his throat and suffocate him whenever he thought of her, or that her lightest and simplest words, her most casual and unconscious glance, would burn in his heart for hours.

During his busy days Wolf found himself musing about this undefined and nebulous happiness that began to tremble, like a growing brightness behind clouds, through all his days and nights. Had there ever been a time, he wondered, when he had taken her for granted, helped her into her blessed little coat as coolly as he had Rose? Had it been this same Norma who scolded him about throwing his collars on the floor, and who had sent his coat to the cleaner with a ten-dollar bill in the pocket?

Wolf remembered summer days, and little Norma chattering beside him on the front seat, as the shabby motor-car fled through the hot, dry city toward shade and coolness. He remembered early Christmas Mass, and Norma and Rose kneeling between him and his mother, in the warm, fir-scented church. He remembered breakfast afterward, in a general sense of hunger and relaxation and well-being, and the girls exulting over their presents. And every time that straight-shouldered, childish figure came into his dream, that

mop of cloudy dark hair and flashing laugh, the new delicious sense of some unknown felicity touched him, and he would glance about the busy factory self-consciously, as if his thoughts were written on his face for all the world to read.

Wolf had never had a sweetheart. It came to him with the blinding flash of all epoch-making discoveries that Norma was his girl—that he wanted Norma for his own, and that there was no barrier between them. And in the ecstasy of this new vision, which changed the whole face of his world, he was content to wait with no special impatience for the hour in which he should claim her. Of course Norma must like him—must love him, as he did her, unworthy as he felt himself of her, and wonderful as this new Norma seemed to be. Wolf, in his simple way, felt that this had been his destiny from the beginning.

That a glimpse of life as foreign and unnatural as the Melrose life might seriously disenchant Norma never occurred to him. Norma had always been fanciful, it was a part of her charm. Wolf, who worked in the great Forman shops, had felt it no particular distinction when by chance one day he had been called from his luncheon to look at the engine of young Stanley Forman's car. He had left his seat upon a pile of lumber, bolted the last of his pie, and leaned over the hood of the specially designed racer interested only in its peculiarities, and entirely indifferent to the respectful young owner, who was aware that he knew far less about it than this mechanic did. Sauntering back to his work in the autumn sunlight, Wolf had followed the youthful millionaire by not even a thought. If he had done so, it might have been a half-contemptuous

decision that a man who knew so little of engines ought not to drive a racer.

So Norma's half-formed jealousies, desires, and dreams were a sealed book to him. But this very unreasonableness lent her an odd exotic charm in his eyes. She was to Wolf like a baby who wants the moon. The moon might be an awkward and useless possession, and the baby much better without it, still there is something winning and touching about the little imperious mouth and the little upstretched arms.

One night, when he had reached home earlier than either of the girls, Wolf was in the warm bright kitchen, alone with his mother. He was seated at the end of the scrubbed and bleached little table; Kate at the other end was neatly and dexterously packing a yellow bowl with bread pudding.

"Do you remember, years and years ago, Mother," Wolf said, chewing a raisin, thoughtfully, "that you told me that Norma isn't my real cousin?"

Kate's ruddy colour paled a little, and she looked anxious. Not Perseus, coming at last in sight of his Gorgon, had a heart more sick with fear than hers was at that instant.

"What put that into your head, dear?"

"Well, I don't know. But it's true, isn't it?"

Kate scattered chopped nuts from the bowl of her spoon.

"Yes, it's true," she said. "There's not a drop of the same blood in your veins, although I love her as I do you and Rose."

She was silent, and Wolf, idly turning the egg-beater in an empty dish, smiled to himself.

"But what made you think of that, Wolf?" his mother asked.

"I don't know!" Wolf did not look at her, but his big handsome face was suffused with happy colour. "Harry and Rose, maybe," he admitted.

Kate sat down suddenly, her eyes upon him.

"Not the Baby?" she half whispered.

Her son leaned back in his chair, and folded his big arms across his chest. When he looked at her the smile had faded from his face, and his eyes were a trifle narrowed, and his mouth set.

"I guess so!" he said, simply. "I guess it's always been—Norma. But I didn't always know it. I used to think of her as just another sister—like Rose. But I know now that she'll never seem that again—never did, really."

He was silent, and Kate sat staring at him in silence.

"Has she any relatives, Mother?"

"Has—what?"

"Has she people—who are they?"

Kate looked at the floor.

"She has no one but me, Son."

"Of course, she's not nineteen, and I don't believe it's ever crossed her mind," Wolf said. "I don't think Norma ever had a real affair—just kid affairs, like Paul Harrison, and that man at the store who used to send her flowers. But I don't believe those count."

"I don't think she ever has," Kate said, heavily getting to her feet, and beginning to pour her custard slowly through the packed bread. Presently she stopped, and set the saucepan down, her eyes narrowed and fixed on space. Then Wolf saw her press the

fingers of one hand upon her mouth, a sure sign of mental perturbation.

"I know I'm not worthy to tie her little shoes for her-Mother," he said, suddenly, and very low.

"There's no woman in the world good enough for you," his mother answered, with a troubled laugh. And she gave the top of his head one of her rare, brisk kisses as she passed him, on her way out of the room.

Wolf was sufficiently familiar with the domestic routine to know that every minute was precious now, and that she was setting the table. But his heart was heavy with a vague uneasiness; she had not encouraged him very much. She had not accepted this suggestion as she did almost all of the young people's ideas, with eager coöperation and sympathy. He sat brooding at the kitchen table, her notable lack of enthusiasm chilling him, and infusing him with her own doubts.

When she came back, she stood with her back turned to him, busied with some manipulation of platters and jars in the ice-box.

"Wolf, dear," she said, "I want to ask you something. The child's too young to listen to you—or any one!—now. Promise me—*promise me*, that you'll speak to me again before you——"

"Certainly I'll promise that, Mother!" Wolf said, quickly, hurt to the soul. She read his tone aright, and came to lay her cheek against his hair.

"Listen to me, Son. Since the day her mother gave her to me I've hoped it would be this way! But there's nothing to be gained by hurry. You——"

"But you would be glad, Mother! You do think that she might have me?" poor Wolf said, eagerly and

humbly. He was amazed to see tears brimming his mother's eyes as she nodded and turned away.

Before either spoke again a rush in the hall announced the home-coming girls, who entered the kitchen gasping and laughing with the cold.

"Whew!" panted Norma, catching Wolf's hands in her own half-frozen ones. "I'm dying! Oh, Wolf, feel my nose!" She pressed it against his forehead. "Oh, there's a wind like a knife—and look at my shoe—in I went, right through the ice! Oh, Aunt Kate, let me stay here!" and locking both slender arms about the older woman's neck, she dropped her dark, shining head upon her breast like a storm-blown bird. "It's four below zero in Broadway this minute," she added, looking sidewise under her curling lashes at Wolf.

"Who said so?" Wolf demanded.

"The man I bought that paper from said so; go back and ask him. Oh, joy, that looks good!" said Norma, eyeing the pudding that was now being drawn, crackling, bubbling, and crisp, from the oven. "Rose and I fell over the new lineoleum in the hall; I thought it was a dead body!" she went on, cheerfully. "I came *down* on my family feature with such a noise that I thought the woman downstairs would be rattling the dumb-waiter ropes again long before this!" She stepped to the dumb-waiter, and put her head into the shaft. "What is it, darling?" she called.

"Norma, behave yourself. It would serve you good and right if she heard you," Mrs. Sheridan said, in a panic. "Go change your shoes, and come and eat your dinner. I believe," her aunt added, pausing near her, "that you *did* skin your nose in the hall."

"Oh, heavens!" Norma exclaimed, bringing her face close to the dark window, as to a mirror. "Oh, say it will be gone by Friday! Because on Friday I'm going to have tea with Mrs. Liggett—her husband came in to-day and asked me. Oh, the darling! He certainly is the—well, the most—well, I don't know! —— His voice, and the quiet, *quiet* way——"

"Oh, for pity's sake go change your shoes!" Rose interrupted. "You are the biggest idiot! I went into the store to get her," Rose explained, "and I've had all this once, in the subway. How Mr. Liggett picks up his glasses, on their ribbon, to read the titles of books——"

"Oh, you shut up!" Norma called, departing. And unashamed, when dinner was finished, and the table cleared, she produced a pack of cards and said that she was going to play *The Idle Year.*

". . . and if I get it, it'll mean that the man I marry is going to look exactly like Chris Liggett."

She did not get it, and played it again. The third time she interrupted Wolf's slow and patient perusal of the *Scientific American* to announce that she was now going to play it to see if he was in love with Mary Redding.

"Think how nice that would be, Aunt Kate, a double wedding. And if Wolf or Rose died and left a lot of children, the other one would always be there to take in whoever was left—you know what I mean!"

"You're the one Wolf ought to marry, to make it complete," Rose, who was neatly marking a cross-stitch "R" on a crash towel, retaliated neatly.

"I can't marry my cousin, Miss Smarty."

"Oh, don't let a little thing like that worry you," Wolf said, looking across the table.

"Our children would be idiots—perhaps they would be, anyway!" Norma reminded him, in a gale of laughter. Her aunt looked up disapprovingly over her glasses.

"Baby, don't talk like that. That's not a nice way to talk at all. Wolf, you lead her on. Now, we'll not have any more of that, if you please. I see the President is making himself very unpopular, Wolf—I don't know why they all make it so hard for the poor man! Mrs. McCrea was in the market this morning——"

"If I win this game, Rose, by this time next year," Norma said, in an undertone, "you'll have——"

"Norma Sheridan!"

"Yes, Aunt Kate!"

"Do you want me to speak to you again?"

"No, ma'am!"

Norma subsided for a brief space, Rose covertly watching the game. Presently the younger girl burst forth anew.

"Listen, Wolf, I'll bet you that I can get more words out of the letters in Christopher than you can!"

Wolf roused himself, smiled, took out his fountain pen, and reached for a sheet of paper. He was always ready for any sort of game. Norma, bending herself to the contest, put her pencil into her mouth, and stared fixedly at the green-shaded drop light. Rose, according to ancient precedent, was permitted to assist evenly and alternately.

And Kate, watching them and listening, even while she drowsed over the Woman's Page, decided that after all they were nothing but a pack of children.

CHAPTER VI

To Leslie Melrose had come the very happiest time of her life. She had always had everything she wanted; it had never occurred to her to consider a fortunate marriage engagement as anything but a matter of course, in her case. She was nineteen, she was "mad," in her own terms, about Acton Liggett, and the engagement was the natural result.

But the ensuing events were far more delightful than Leslie had dreamed, even in her happy dreams. All her world turned from its affairs of business and intrigue and amusement to centre its attention upon her little person for the moment, and to shower her with ten times enough flattery and praise to turn a much steadier head. Presents rained upon Leslie, and every one of them was astonishingly handsome and valuable; newspapers clamoured for her picture, and wherever she went she was immediately the focus for all eyes. That old Judge Lee should send her some of his mother's beautiful diamonds; that Christopher and Alice should order for her great crates of specially woven linen that were worthy of a queen; that Emanuel Massaro, the painter of the hour, should ask her to sit for him, were all just so much sheer pleasure added to the sum total of her happiness in loving the man of her choice and knowing herself beloved by him.

Leslie found herself, for the first time in her life, a person of importance with Aunt Annie, too. The

social leader found time to advise her little niece in the new contingencies that were perpetually arising, lent Leslie her private secretary for the expeditious making of lists or writing of notes, and bullied her own autocratic modiste into promising at least half of the trousseau. It was Annie who decided that the marriage must be at a certain Park Avenue church, and at a certain hour, and that the reception at the house must be arranged in a certain manner, and no other. Hendrick or Judge Lee would give away the bride, Christopher would be his brother's best man, and Leslie would be given time to greet her guests and change her gown and be driven to Alice's house for just one kiss before she and Acton went away.

Acton had begged for an Easter wedding, but Leslie, upon her aunt's advice, held out for June. If the war was over by that time—and everyone said it must be, for so hideous a combat could not possibly last more than six or eight months—then they would go to England and the Continent, but otherwise they might drift through Canada to the Pacific Coast, and even come back by San Francisco and the newly opened Canal.

Meanwhile, Annie entertained her niece royally and untiringly. Formal dinners to old family friends must come first, but when spring arrived Leslie was promised house parties and yachting trips more after her own heart. The girl was so excited, so bewildered and tired, even after the first two weeks, that she remained in bed until noon every day, and had a young maid especially detailed to take her dressmaker's fittings for her. But even so she lost weight, her cheeks burned and her eyes glittered feverishly, and her voice took an unnaturally high key, her speech a certain

shallow quickness. Acton's undeviating adoration she took with a pretty, spoiled acquiescence, and with old family friends she was charmingly dutiful and deferential, but always with the air of sparing a few glittering drops to their age and dulness from the overflowing cup of her youth and beauty and power. But with her grandmother and aunts she had a new attitude of self-confidence, and to her girl friends she was no longer the old intimate and equal, but a being who had, for the moment at least, left them all behind. She would show them the new silver, the new linens, the engagement-time frocks that were in themselves a trousseau, and wish that Doris or Marion or Virginia were engaged, too; it was such fun! And with older women, the débutantes of six and eight and ten years ago, who had failed of all this glory, who could only listen sweetly to the chatter of plans and honours, and look in uncomplaining admiration at the blazing ring, Leslie was quite merciless. The number of times that she managed to mention her age, the fact that Madame Modiste had tried to give her fittings after three o'clock under the impression that she was a schoolgirl, and the "craziness" of "little me" going over all the late Mrs. Liggett's chests of silver and china, perhaps only these unsuccessful candidates for matrimony could estimate. Certainly Leslie herself was quite unconscious of it, and truly believed what she heard on all sides, that she was "adorable," and "not changed one bit," and "just as unconscious that there was anything else in the world but Acton, as a little girl with her first doll."

Christopher and Alice, in the first years of their married life, had built a home at Glen Cove, and

Christopher made this his wedding present to his brother. Necessarily, even the handsomest of country homes, if ten years old, needs an almost complete renovation, and this renovation Acton and Leslie, guided by a famous architect, began rapturously to plan, reserving a beautiful apartment not far from Alice in Park Avenue for autumn furnishing and refitting.

All these activities and interests kept the lovers busy, and kept them apart indeed, or united them only in groups of other people. But Acton could bring his pretty sweetheart home from a dinner now and then, and come into the old Melrose house for a precious half hour of murmuring talk, or could sometimes persuade her to leave a tea or a matinée early enough to walk a few blocks with him.

In this fashion they slipped away from a box party one Friday afternoon, and found themselves walking briskly northward, into the neighbourhood of Alice's house. Leslie had had, for several days, a rather guilty feeling in regard to this lovely aunt. It was really hard, rising at noon, and trying to see and please so many persons, to keep in close touch with the patient and uncomplaining invalid, who had to depend wholly upon the generosity of those she loved for knowledge of them. So Leslie was glad to suggest, and Acton glad to agree, that they had better go in and see Aunt Alice for a few minutes.

As usual, Mrs. Liggett had company, although it proved only to be the pretty Miss Sheridan who had called upon Leslie's grandmother on the first day of that mysterious indisposition that had kept the old lady bedridden almost ever since.

Alice looked oddly tired, but her eyes were shining

brightly, and Norma was charmingly happy and at ease. She jumped up to shake hands with Acton with a bright comment that he was not in the *least* like his brother, and recalled herself to Leslie before offering her all sorts of good wishes. Norma, hoping that it would some day occur, had indeed anticipated this meeting with Leslie by a little mental consideration of what she should say, but the effect was so spontaneous and sincere that the four were enabled to settle down comfortably to tea, in a few moments, like old friends.

"Miss Sheridan—or Norma, rather—and I have been having a perfectly delicious talk," said Alice. "She loves Christina Rossetti, and she knew the 'Hound of Heaven' by heart, and she has promised to send me a new man's work that sounds delightful—what was it? Something about General Booth?"

"If I haven't chattered you to death!" Norma said, penitentially. And Leslie added: "Aunt Alice, you *do* look tired! Not that talking poetry ever would tire you!" she hastened to add, with a smile for Norma.

"No, I'm not—or rather, I was, but I feel wonderfully!" Alice said. "Pour the tea, Kitten. What have you two little adventurers been doing with yourselves?"

"Mrs. Dupré's party—Yvette Guilbert," Leslie said. "She is quite too wonderful!"

"I've always wanted to see her, and I've always known I would adore her," Norma interpolated, dreamily.

Alice glanced at her quickly.

"Does she give another matinée, Leslie?"

"Two——" Leslie looked at Acton. "Is it two weeks from to-day?" she questioned.

"I'll send you seats for it," Alice said, making a little note on her ivory memoranda pages, as she nodded to Norma. The colour rushed into Norma's face, and she bit her lip.

"But, Mrs. Liggett—honestly—I truly didn't mean —I only meant——" she began to stammer, half laughing. Alice laid her hand upon Norma's reassuringly.

"My dear, you know I don't think you hinted! But I want to do it. I can't"— Alice said, smiling— "I can't do anything for little Miss Aladdin here, and it gives me the greatest pleasure, now and then——"

"I want to tell you something about Mrs. Liggett," Acton said; "she's got a grasping nature and a mean soul—you can see that! She's the limit, all right!" He smiled down at her as he gave her her teacup, and Leslie laughed outright. Acton was a person of few words, but when he chose to talk, Leslie found his manner amusing. Christopher, coming up to join them fifteen minutes later, said that from the noise they made he had supposed at least fifty persons to be in his wife's room.

Did Norma, as she gave the master of the house her hand, have sudden memory of all her recent absurd extravagances in his name—the games, the surmises, the wild statements that had had Chris Liggett as their inspiration? If she did, she gave no sign of it beyond the bright flush with which she greeted her oldest acquaintance in this group. Christopher sat down, content to be a listener and an onlooker, as he sipped his tea, but Norma saw that his wife's look of white fatigue made him uneasy, and immediately said that she must go.

He made no protest, but said that the car was at the

door, and she must let him send her home. Norma agreed, and Acton asked if he and Leslie might not use it, too. The three departed in high spirits, Alice detaining the radiant and excited Norma long enough to exact from her the promise of another visit soon, and to send an affectionate message to Mrs. Sheridan from "Miss Alice." Then they went down to the big car, an exciting and delightful experience to Norma.

Leslie was left first, and Acton, pleading that he was already late for another engagement, was dropped at his club. Then Norma had the car to herself, and as it smoothly flew toward the humble doorway of the Sheridans, could giggle, almost aloud, in her pleasure and exhilaration at an afternoon that had gone without a single awkward minute, all pleasant, harmonious, and vaguely flattering. And the wonderful Mrs. Liggett had asked her to come soon again, and had made that delightful suggestion about the concert. The name of Yvette Guilbert meant little to Norma, but the thought that Alice Liggett really wanted to hold her friendship was nothing less than intoxicating.

She looked out of the car, the streets were bare of snow now, there was not a leaf showing in the park, and the ground was dark and unpromising. But a cool, steady wind was blowing through the lingering twilight, men were running after rolling hats, and at least the milliners' windows were radiant with springtime bloom. Children were playing in Norma's street, wrapped and muffled children, wild with joy to be out of doors again, and a tiny frail little moon was floating in the opal sky just above the grim line of roofs. Norma looked up at it, and the pure blowing air touched her hot face, and her heart sang with the sheer joy of living.

CHAPTER VII

CHRISTOPHER had gone down to the door with his brother and the girls, and had sent a glance up and down the quiet, handsome block, feeling in the moving air what Norma felt, what all the city felt—the bold, wild promise of spring. He turned back into the house with something like a sigh; Acton and Leslie in their young happiness were somehow a little haunting tonight.

The butler was starting upstairs with the papers; Christopher took them from him, and went back to Alice's room with his eyes idly following the headlines. The pretty apartment was somewhat disordered, and looked dull and dark in the half light. Christopher walked to a window, and pushed it open upon its railed balcony.

"Chris!" whispered his wife's voice, thick and dry in the gloom.

Aghast in the instant apprehension of something wrong, he sprang to her couch, dropped to his knees, and put an arm about her.

"Alice! What is it, my darling?"

She struggled for speech, and he could see that her face was ashen.

"Chris—no, don't ring. Chris, *who is that girl?*"

Christopher touched the chain that flooded the couch with rosy light. He bent in eager sympathy over his wife's relaxed form.

"Alice, what is it?" he asked, tenderly. "Don't worry, dear, don't try to talk too fast! Just tell Chris what frightened you——"

Alice laughed wretchedly as she detached the fingers he had pressed anxiously upon her forehead.

"No, I'm not feverish!" she assured him, holding tight to his hand. "But I want you to tell me, Chris, I must know—and no matter what promise you have given Mother—or given any one——"

"Now, now, now!" he soothed her. "I'll tell you anything, sweetheart, only don't let yourself get so excited. Just tell me what it is, Alice, and I'll do anything in the world for you, of course!"

"Chris," she said, swallowing with a dry throat, and sitting up with an air of regaining self-control, "you must tell me. You know you can trust me, you *know——!* That girl——"

"But *what* girl—what are you talking about, dear? Do—do try to be just a little clearer, and calmer——"

"Who"— said Alice, with a ghastly look, sweeping the hair back from her damp forehead—"who is that Norma Sheridan?"

"Why, I told you, dear, that I don't know," her husband protested. "I told you weeks ago, after your mother made that scene, the night of Hendrick's speech, that I couldn't make head or tail of it!"

"Chris"—Alice was regarding him fixedly—"you *must* know!"

"Dearest, couldn't your mother simply wish to befriend a girl whose parents——"

Alice flung her loosened hair back, and at her gesture and her glance at the little carafe on her table he poured her a glass of cold water. Drinking it off, and raising

herself in her cushions, she stretched her hand to touch the chair beside her, and still without a word indicated that he was to take it. With a face of grave concern Christopher sat down beside her, holding her hands in both his own.

"Chris," she said, clearly and quickly, if with occasional catches of breath, "the minute that girl came into the room I knew that—I knew that *horror* had come upon us all! I knew that she was one of us—one of us Melroses, somehow——"

"Alice!" he said, pleadingly.

"But Mama," she said, with a keen look, "didn't tell you that?"

"She told me only what I told you that night, on my honour as a gentleman! Alice, what makes you say what you do?"

"Ah, Chris," his wife cried, almost frantically, "look at her! *Look* at her! Why, her voice is Annie's, the same identical voice—she looks like my father, like Theodore—she looks like us all! She and Leslie were so much alike, as they sat there, in spite of the colouring, that I almost screamed it at them! Surely—surely, you see it—everyone sees it!"

He stared at her, beginning to breathe a little quickly in his turn.

"By George!" she heard him whisper, as if to himself.

"Do you see it, Chris?" Alice whispered, almost fearfully.

"But—but——" He got up and walked restlessly to the window, and came back to sit down again. "But there's a cousinship somewhere," he said, sensibly. "There's no reason to suppose that the thing can't

be explained. I do think you're taking this thing pretty hard, my dear. What can you possibly suppose? There might be a hundred girls——"

His voice fell. Alice was watching him expectantly.

"Mama felt it—saw it—as I do," she said. "You may be very sure that Mama wouldn't have almost lost her mind, as she did, unless something had given her cause!"

They looked at each other in silence, in the utter silence of the lovely, cool-toned room.

"Alice," Chris said in a puzzled voice after awhile, "you suspect me of keeping something from you. But on my honour you know all that your mother told me—all that I know!"

"Oh, Chris," she said, with a sort of wail. "If I don't know more!"

Her husband's slow colour rose.

"How could you know more?" he asked, bewilderedly.

Alice was unhappily silent.

"Chris, if I tell you what I'm afraid of—what I fear," she said, presently, after anxious thought, "will you promise me never, never to speak of it—never even to think of it!—if it—if it proves not to be true?"

"I don't have to tell you that, Alice," he said.

"No, of course you don't—of course you don't!" she echoed with a nervous laugh. "I'll tell you what I think, Chris—what has been almost driving me mad—and you can probably tell me a thousand reasons why it can't be so! You see, I've never understood Mama's feverish distress these last weeks. She's been to see me, she's done what had to be done about Leslie's engagement, but she's not herself—you can see that!

Yesterday she began to cry, almost for nothing, and when I happened to mention—or rather when I mentioned very deliberately—that Miss Sheridan was coming here, she almost shrieked. Well, I didn't know what to make of it, and even then I rather wondered——

"Even then," Alice began again, after a painful pause, and with her own voice rising uncontrollably, "I suspected something. But not this! Oh, Chris, if I'm wrong about this, I shall be on my knees for gratitude for the rest of my life; I would die, I would die to have it just—just my wretched imagination!—A thing like this—to us—the Melroses—who have always been so straight—so respected!"

"Now, Alice—now, Alice!"

"Yes, I know!" she said, quickly. "I know!" And for a moment she lay back quietly, stroking his hand. "Chris," she resumed, composedly, after a moment, "you know the tragedy of Annie's life?"

Chris, taken by surprise, frowned.

"Why, yes, I suppose so," he admitted, unwillingly.

"Chris, did it ever occur to you that she might have had a child—by that fiend?"

Chris looked at his wife a moment, and his eyes widened, and his mouth twitched humorously.

"Oh, come now, Alice—come now!"

"You think it's folly!" she asked, eagerly.

"Worse!" he answered, briefly, his eyes smiling reproach.

Alice's whole tense body relaxed, and she stared at him with light dawning in her eyes.

"Well, probably it is," she said, very simply.

"Of course it is," Chris said. "Now, you are dead tired, dear, and you have let the thing mill about in

your head until you can't see anything normally. I confess that I don't understand your mother's mysterious nervousness, but then I am free to say that I don't by any means always understand your mother! You remember the pearl episode, and the time that she had Annie and Hendrick cabling from Italy—because Hendrick Junior had a rash! And then there was Porter—a boy nineteen years old, and she actually had everyone guessing exactly what she felt toward him——"

"Oh, Chris, no, she didn't! She simply felt that he was a genius, and he hadn't a penny," Alice protested, reproachful and hurt.

"Well, she had him there at the house until his mother came after him, and then, when he finally was sent abroad, she asked me seriously if I thought two hundred dollars a month was enough for his musical education!"

"Yes, I know!" Alice said, ruefully, shaking her head.

"Now this comes along," said Christopher, encouraged by the effect of his words, "and you begin to fret your poor little soul with all sorts of wild speculations. I wish to the Lord that your mother was a little bit more trusting with her confidences, but when it all comes out it'll prove to be some sister of your grandfather who married a tailor or something, and left a line of pretty girls to work in Biretta's——"

"But, Chris, she reminded me so of Annie to-day I almost felt *sick*," Alice said, still frightened and dubious.

"Well, that merely shows that you're soft-hearted; it's no reflection on Annie!" Chris said, giving her her

paper, and opening his own. But Alice did not open her paper.

A maid came in, and moved about noiselessly setting chairs and rugs in order. Another soft light was lighted and the little square table set before the fire. The cool fresh air drifted in at the half-open window, and sent a delicate breath, from Alice's great bowl of freesia lilies, through the peaceful room. The fire snapped smartly about a fresh log, and Alice's great tortoise-shell cat came to make a majestic spring into her lap.

"Chris—I'm so worried!" said his wife.

"As a matter of fact," said Christopher, quietly, after a while, "did—— Annie was very ill, I know, but was there—was there any reason to suppose that there might have been—that such a situation as to-day's might have arisen?"

Alice looked at him with apprehension dawning afresh.

"Oh, yes—that is, I believe so. I didn't know it then, of course."

"I never knew that," Christopher said, thoughtfully.

"Well, I didn't at the time, you know. It was—of course it was sixteen—eighteen years ago," Alice said. And in a whisper she added, "Chris, that girl is eighteen!"

Christopher pursed his lips to whistle, but made no sound, and looked into the fire.

"You see I was only about thirteen or fourteen," Alice said. "I was going to Miss Bennet's school, and we were all living in the Madison Avenue house. Papa had been dead only a year, or less, for I remember that Annie was eighteen, and wasn't going out much, because of mourning. Theodore had been worrying Mama to death, and had left the house then, and Mama was

sending him and his wife money, I believe, but of course lots of that was kept from me. Annie was terribly wild and excitable then, always doing reckless things; I can remember when she and Belle Duer dressed up as boys and had their pictures taken, and once they put a matrimonial advertisement in the papers—of course they were just silly—at least that was. But then she began to rave about this man Müller——"

"The acrobat!" Christopher, who was listening intently, supplied.

"No, dearest! He was their riding master—I suppose that isn't much better, really. But he was an extremely handsome man—really stunning. Carry Winchester's mother forbade her taking any more lessons because *she* was so wild about him, and Annie told me once that that was why Ida Burnett was popped into a boarding school. He was big, and dark, and he had a slight foreign accent, and he was ever so much older than Annie—forty, at least. She began to spend all her time at the riding club; it used to make Mama wild—especially as Annie was so headstrong and saucy about it! Poor Mama, I remember her crying and complaining!"

"And how long did this go on?" Christopher asked.

"Oh, weeks! Well, and then one hot day, just before Easter vacation it was, I remember, I came home early from school with a headache, and when I reached the upper hall I could hear Mama crying, and Annie shouting out loud, and this Kate—this very same Kate Sheridan!—trying to quiet Mama, and everything in an uproar! Finally I heard Annie sobbing—I was frightened to death of course, and I sat down on the stairs that go up to the nursery—and I heard

Annie say something about being eighteen—and she *was* eighteen the very day before; and she ran by me, in her riding clothes, with the derby hat that girls used to wear then, and her hair clubbed on her neck, and she ran downstairs, and I could hear her crying, and saying to herself: 'I'll show them; I'll show them!' And that was the last I saw of her," Alice finished sadly, "for almost two years."

"She went out?" Christopher asked.

"Yes; she slammed the door. Mama fainted."

"Of course!"

"Oh, Chris," said his wife, half crying, "wasn't that enough to make any one faint?—let alone Mama. Anyway, she was dreadfully ill, and they rather shut me up about it, and told everyone that Annie had gone abroad. We had been living very quietly, you know, and nobody cared much what Annie did, then. And she really had gone abroad, she wrote Mama from Montreal, and she had been married to Emil Müller in Albany. They had taken a train there, and were married that same afternoon. They went to London, and they were in Germany, and then—then it all broke up, you know about that!"

"How much later was that?"

Alice considered.

"It was about Christmas time. Don't you remember that I went to your mother, and Acton and I got measles? Mama was abroad then."

"And this Kate went with her?"

"Yes. That was—that was one of the things I was—just thinking about! Annie wrote Mama that she was very ill, in Munich, and poor Mama just flew. Müller had left her; indeed there was a woman and two

quite big girls that had a claim on him, and if Mama hadn't been so anxious to shut it all up, she might have proved that he was a bigamist—but I don't know that she was ever sure. Judge Lee put the divorce through for Annie, and Mama took her to the Riviera and petted her, and pulled her through. But all her hair came out, and for weeks they didn't think she would live. She had brain fever. You see, Annie had had some money waiting for her on her eighteenth birthday, and your own father, who was her guardian, Chris, had given her the check—interest, it was, about seven or eight thousand dollars. And he told her to open her own account, and manage her own income, from then on. And we thought —Mama and I—that in some way Müller must have heard of it. Anyway, she never deposited the check, and when her money gave out he just left her."

"But what makes you think that her illness didn't commence—or wasn't entirely—brain fever?"

"That she might have had a baby?" Alice asked, outright.

Christopher nodded, the point almost insufferably distasteful to him.

"Oh, I know it!" Alice said.

"You *know* it?" the man echoed, almost in displeasure.

"Yes, she told me herself! But of course that was years later. At the time, all I knew was that Kate Sheridan came home, and came to see me at school, and told me that Mama and Annie were very well, but that Annie had been frightfully sick, and that Mama wouldn't come back until Annie was much stronger. As a matter of fact, it was nearly two years—Theodore took me over to them a year from that following sum-

mer, and then Annie stayed with some friends in England; she was having a wonderful time! But years afterward, when little Hendrick was coming, in fact, she was here one day, and she seemed to feel blue, and finally I happened to say that if motherhood seemed so hard to a person like herself, whose husband and whose whole family were so mad with joy over the prospect of a baby, what on earth must it be to the poor girls who have every reason to hate it. And she looked at me rather oddly, and said: 'Ah, I know what *that* is!' Of course I guessed right away what she meant, and I said: 'Annie—not really!' And she said: 'Oh, yes, that was what started my illness. I had been so almost crazy—so blue and lonesome, and so sick with horror at the whole thing, that it all happened too soon, the day after Mama and Kate got there, in fact!' And then she burst out crying and said: 'Thank God it was that way! I couldn't have faced *that.*' And she said that she had been too desperately ill to realize anything, but that afterward, at Como, when she was much better, she asked Mama about it, and Mama said she must only be glad that it was all over, and try to think of it as a terrible dream!"

"Well, there you are," said Chris, "she herself says that no child was born!"

"Yes, but, Chris, mightn't it be that she didn't know?" Alice submitted, timidly.

Her husband eyed her with a faint and thoughtful frown.

"It seems to me that that is rather a fantastic theory, dear! Where would this child be all this time?"

"Kate" Alice said, simply.

"Kate!" he echoed, struck. And Alice saw, with a

sinking heart, that he was impressed. After a full moment of silence he said, simply: "You think this is the child?"

"Chris," his wife cried, appealingly, "I don't say I think so! But it occurred to me that it might be. I hope, with all my soul, that you don't think so!"

"I'm afraid," he answered, thoughtfully, "that I do!"

Alice's eyes filled with tears, and she tightened her fingers in his without speaking.

"The idea being," Christopher mused, "that Mrs. Sheridan brought the baby home, and has raised her. That makes Miss Sheridan—Norma—the child of Annie and that German blackguard!"

"I suppose so!" Alice admitted, despairingly.

"But why has it been kept quiet all this time!"

"Well, that," Alice said, "I don't understand. But this I *am* sure of: Annie hasn't the faintest suspicion of it! She supposes that the whole thing ended with her terrible illness. She was only eighteen, and younger and more childish even than Leslie is! Oh, Chris," said Alice, her eyes watering, "isn't it horrible! To come to us, of all people! Will everybody know?"

"Well, it all depends. It's a nasty sort of business, but I suppose there's no help for it. How much does Hendrick know?"

"About Annie? Oh, everything that she does; I know that. Annie told him, and Judge Lee told him about Müller and the divorce, or nullification, or whatever it was! There was nothing left unexplained there. But if the child lived, she didn't know that—only Mama did, and Kate. Oh, poor Annie, it would kill her to have all that raked up now! Why Kate kept it secret all these years——"

"I must say," Christopher exclaimed, "that—— By George, I hate this sort of thing! No help for it, I suppose. But if it gets out we shall all be in for a sweet lot of notoriety. We shall just have to make terms with these Sheridans, and keep our mouths shut. I didn't get the idea that they were holding your mother up. I believe it's more that she wants justice done; she would, you know, for the sake of the family. The girl herself, this Norma, evidently hasn't been raised on any expectations—probably knows nothing about it!"

"Oh, I'm sure of that!" Alice agreed, eagerly. "And if she has Melrose blood in her, you may be sure she'll play the game. But, Chris, I can't stand the uncertainty. Mama's coming to have luncheon with me tomorrow, and I'm going to ask her outright. And if this Norma is really—what we fear, what do you think we ought to do?"

"Well, it's hard to say. It's all utterly damnable," Christopher said, distressed. "And Annie, who let us all in for it, gets off scot free! I wish, since she let it go so long, that your mother had forgotten it entirely. But, as it is, this child isn't, strictly speaking, illegitimate. There was a marriage, and some sort of divorce, whether Müller deceived Annie as to his being a bachelor or not!"

A maid stood in the doorway.

"Mrs. Melrose, Mrs. Liggett."

"Oh," Alice said, in an animated tone of pleasure, "ask her to come upstairs!" But the eyes she turned to her husband were full of apprehension. "Chris, here's Mama now! Shall we——? Would you dare?"

"Use your own judgment!" he had time to say hastily, before his wife's mother came in.

CHAPTER VIII

Mrs. Melrose frequently came in to join Alice for dinner, especially when she was aware, as to-night, that Christopher had an evening engagement. She was almost always sure of finding Annie alone, and enjoying the leisurely confidences that were crowded out of the daytime hours.

She had had several weeks of nervous illness now, but looked better to-night, looked indeed her handsome and comfortable self, as she received Chris's filial kiss on her forehead, and bent to embrace her daughter. Freda carried away her long fur-trimmed cloak, and she pushed her veil up to her forehead, and looked with affectionate concern from husband to wife.

"Now, Chris, I'm spoiling things! But I thought Carry Pope told me that you were going to her dinner before the opera!"

"I'm due there at eight," he said, reassuringly. "And by the same token, I ought to be dressing! But Alice and I have been loafing along here comfortably, and I'd give about seven dollars to stay at home with my wife!"

"He always says that!" Alice said, smilingly. "But he always has a nice time; and then the next night he plays over the whole score, and tells me who was there, and so I have it, too!"

Chris had walked to the white mantelpiece, and was lighting a cigarette.

"Alice had that little protégée of yours here, to-day, Aunt Marianna," he said, casually.

There was no mistaking the look of miserable and fearful interest that deepened instantly in the older woman's eyes.

"Miss Sheridan?" she said.

"Mama," Alice exclaimed, suddenly, clasping a warm hand over her mother's trembling one, and looking at her with all love and reassurance, "you know how Chris and I love you, don't you?"

Tears came into Mrs. Melrose's eyes.

"Of course I do, lovey," she faltered.

"Mama, you know how we would stand behind you —how anxious we are to share whatever's worrying you!" Alice went on, pleadingly. "Can't you—I'm not busy like Annie, or young like Leslie, and Chris is your man of business, after all! Can't you tell us about it? Two heads—three heads," said Alice, smiling through a sudden mist of tears, "are better than one!"

"Why," Mrs. Melrose stammered, with a rather feeble attempt at lightness, "have I been acting like a person with something on her mind? It's nothing, children, nothing at all. Don't bother your dear, generous hearts about it another second!"

And she looked from one to another with a gallant smile.

Chris eyed his wife with a faint, hopeless movement of the head, and Alice correctly interpreted it to mean that the situation was worse instead of better.

"You remember the night you sent for me, some weeks ago, Aunt Marianna?" he ventured. Mrs. Melrose moistened her lips, and swallowed with a dry throat, looking at him with a sort of alert defiance.

"I confess that I was all upset that night," she admitted, bravely. "And to tell you children the truth, Kate Sheridan coming upon me so unexpectedly——"

"Joseph quite innocently told me that evening that you had anticipated her coming!" Christopher said, quietly, as she paused.

"Joseph was mistaken!" Mrs. Melrose said, warmly, with red colour beginning to burn in her soft, faded old face. "Kate had been associated with a terrible time in my life," she went on, almost angrily. "And it was quite natural—or at least it seems so to me!—I don't know what other people would feel, but to *me*—— But what are you two cross-examining me for?" she interrupted herself to ask, with a sudden rush of tears, as Chris looked unconvinced, and Alice still watched her sorrowfully. "Little do you know, either of you, what I have been through——"

"Mama," entreated Alice, earnestly, "will you answer me one question? I promise you that I won't ask another. You know how anxious we are only to help you, to make everything run smoothly. You know what the family is—to us. Don't you *see* we are?" Alice asked suddenly, seeing that the desire for sympathy and advice was rapidly breaking up the ice that had chilled her mother's heart for long weeks. "Won't you tell me just this—it's about Annie, Mama. When she was so ill in Munich. Was—was her little baby born there?"

"Yes!" Mrs. Melrose whispered, with fascinated eyes fixed on her daughter's face.

Alice, ashen faced, fell back against her pillows without speaking.

"Kate Sheridan brought the child home," Chris-

topher stated, rather than asked, very quietly. His mother-in-law looked at him apathetically.

"Kate—yes!"

"Does Annie know it, Mama?" Alice whispered, after a silence.

"Annie? Oh, my God, no!" The mother's voice rose almost to a wail. "Oh, Chris—Alice—if you love me, Annie must not know! So proud, so happy; and she would never bear it! I know her—I know her! She would kill herself before——"

"Darling, you must be quiet!" Alice said, commandingly. "No one shall know it. What we do for this child shall be done for—well, our cousin. Chris will help you manage everything, and no one shall ever suspect it from me. It will all work out right, you'll see. Other people aren't watching us, as we always think they are; it's nobody's business if a cousin of ours suddenly appears in the family. No one would dare whisper one word against the Melroses. Only be quiet, Mama darling, and don't worry. Now that we know it, we will never, never allude to it again, will we, Chris? You can trust us."

Mrs. Melrose had sunk back into her chair; her face was putty-coloured, beads of water stood on her forehead.

"Oh, the relief—the relief!" she kept whispering, as she clung to Alice's hand. "Alice, for the sake of the name—dear—for all our sakes!——"

"Now, if you two girls will take my advice!" Christopher suggested, cheerfully, "you'll stop talking about all this, and let it wait until to-morrow. Then we'll consult, and see just what proposition we can make to little Miss Sheridan, and what's best to be done. Alice,

why don't you go over that wedding list of Leslie's with your mother? And ring for dinner. I'm going to dress."

"We will!" Alice agreed, sensibly. "As a family we've always faced things courageously. We're fighters —we Melroses—and we'll stand together!"

CHAPTER IX

THIS was on Friday, and it was on the following Monday that Wolf and Rose Sheridan came home to find news awaiting them. The day before had been surprisingly sunny and sweet, and Wolf and Harry Redding had taken the girls to Newark, where Wolf's motor-car had been stored all winter, and they had laughed, and joked, and chattered all the way like the care-free young things they were. Mrs. Sheridan, urged to join them, had pleaded business: she had promised old Mrs. Melrose to go and see her. So she had left them at the church door, after Mass, and they had gone their way rejoicing in sunshine and warm breezes, a part of the streaming holiday crowds that were surging and idling along the drying pavements.

Wolf was neither of an age nor type for piety, but to-day he had prayed that this little Norma kneeling beside him, with the youth and fire and audacity shining in her face even while she prayed, might turn that same mysterious and solemn smile upon him again some day, as his wife. And all day long, as she danced along by his side, as she eagerly debated the question of luncheon, as she enslaved the aged coloured man in the garage, the new thrill of which he had only recently become so pleasantly conscious, stirred in his heart, and whatever she touched, or said, or looked, was beautified almost beyond recognition.

He had thought, coming home Monday night, that

he and she would take a little walk, in the lingering dusk of the cool spring evening, and perhaps see the twelfth installment of "The Stripe-Faced Terror," which was playing in the near-by moving-picture house.

But he found her in a new mood, almost awed with an unexpected ecstasy in which he had no part—would never have a part. She and Aunt Kate had been to see Mrs. Melrose again.

"And, Wolf, what do you think! They want me to go live there—with the Liggetts, to help with lists and things for Leslie's wedding. Mrs. Melrose kissed me, Wolf, and said—didn't she, Aunt Kate?—that I must try to feel that I belong to them; and she was so sweet—she put her arm about me, and said that I must have some pretty clothes! And the car is coming for me on Wednesday; isn't it like a dream? Oh, Rose, if I'm thankful enough! And I'm to come back here for dinner once a week, and of course you and Rose are to come there! Oh, Rose, but I wish it was us both—I wish it was you, you're so good!"

"I wouldn't have it, Norma," Rose said, in her honest, pleasant voice. "You know I'd feel like a fool."

"Oh, but I am so happy!" And Norma, who had gotten into Aunt Kate's lap, as the marvellous narrative progressed, dug her face into Aunt Kate's motherly soft shoulder, and tightened her arms about her neck, and cried a little, for sheer joy.

But Wolf said almost nothing, and when he went to wash his hands for supper he went slowly, and found himself staring absently at the towel, and stopping short in the hall, still staring. He seemed himself at dinner, and his mother, at first watching him anxiously, could resume her meal, and later, could fall asleep, in

the confident hope that it would all come right, after all. But Wolf slipped from the house after awhile, and walked the streets until almost dawn.

It was almost dawn, too when the old mistress of the Melrose mansion fell asleep. She had called Regina more than once, she had tried the effect of reading, and of hot milk, and of a cold foot-bath. But still the crowded, over-furnished room was filled with ghosts, and still she watched them, pleaded with them, blamed them.

"I've done all I could!" she whispered at last, into the heavy dark before the dawn. "It isn't my fault if they think she's Annie's child! I've never said so—it was Alice and Chris who said so. Annie and Leslie will never know anything more, and the girl herself need never know anything at all. Perhaps, as Kate said yesterday, it will all work out right, this way! At least it's all we can do now!"

CHAPTER X

So IT came about quite naturally that the little unknown cousin of the Melroses was made a familiar figure in their different family groups, and friends of the house grew accustomed to finding pretty little Norma Sheridan lunching with Leslie, reading beside Alice's couch in the late summer afternoons, or amusing and delighting the old head of the family in a hundred charming ways. Norma called Mrs. Melrose "Aunt Marianna" now, as Chris and Acton did. She did not understand the miracle, it remained a marvel still, but it was enough that it continued to deepen and spread with every enchanted hour.

She had longed—what girl in Biretta's Bookstore did not?—to be rich, and to move and have her being "in society." And now she had her wish, a hundred times fulfilled, and of course she was utterly and absolutely happy.

That is, except for the momentary embarrassments and jealousies and uncertainties, and for sometimes being bored, she thought that she might consider herself happy. And there were crumpled rose-leaves everywhere! she reminded herself sternly. She—Norma Sheridan—could spend more money upon the single item of shoes, for example, than Miss Smith, head of Biretta's Bookshop, could earn in a whole long year of hot months and cold, of weary days and headachy days.

That part of it was "fun", she admitted to herself. The clothes were fun, the boxes and boxes and boxes that came home for her, the petticoats and stockings, the nightgowns heavy with filet lace, and the rough boots for tramping and driving, and the silk and satin slippers for the house. Nothing disappointing there! Norma never would forget the ecstasies of those first shopping trips with Aunt Marianna. Did she want them?—the beaded bag, the woolly scarf, the little saucy hat, were all to be sent to Miss Sheridan, please. Norma lost her breath, and laughed, and caught it again and lost it afresh. They had so quickly dropped the little pretence that she was to make herself useful, these wonderful and generous Melroses; they had so soon forgotten everything except that she was Leslie's age, and to be petted and spoiled as if she had been another Leslie!

And now, after more than half a year, she knew that they liked her; that all of them liked her in their varying degrees. Old Mrs. Melrose and Alice—Mrs. Christopher Liggett—were most warmly her champions, perhaps, but Leslie was too unformed a character to be definitely hostile, and the little earlier jealousies and misunderstandings were blown away long ago, and even the awe-inspiring Annie had shown a real friendliness of late. Acton Liggett and Hendrick von Behrens were always kind and admiring, and Norma had swiftly captivated Annie's little boys. But of them all, she still liked Chris Liggett the best, and felt nearest Chris even when he scolded her, or hurt her feelings with his frank advice. And she knew that Chris thoroughly liked her, in spite of the mistakes that she was continually making, and the absurd ways

in which her ignorance and strangeness still occasionally betrayed her.

It had been a time full of mistakes, of course. Chris often told her that she had more brains in her little finger than most of the girls of her set had in their whole bodies, but that had not saved her. If she was pretty, they were all pretty, too. If she wore beautiful clothes, they wore clothes just as beautiful, and with more assurance. If her wit was quick, and her common sense and human experience far greater than theirs, these were just the qualities they neither needed nor trusted. They spoke their own language, the language of youthful arrogance and ignorance, the language of mutual compliments and small personalities, and Norma could not speak this tongue any more than she could join them when they broke easily into French or German or Italian. She could ride, because she was not afraid of the mild-mannered cobs that were used at the riding school and in the park, but she knew little of correct posture and proper handling of reins. She could swim, as Wolf had taught her, in the old river years ago, but she knew nothing of the terms and affectations of properly taught swimming. When she went to see Aunt Kate, she was almost ashamed of the splendour of her clothing and the utter luxury of the life she led, but with Leslie and her friends she often felt herself what perhaps they thought her, an insignificant little poor relation of the Melroses, who had appeared from nobody knew where, and might return unchallenged at any moment to her original obscurity.

This phase of the new life was disappointing, and Norma realized herself that she spent a quite disproportionate amount of time in thinking about it. Wasn't

it enough, she would ask herself impatiently, to be one of them at all, to see one's picture in the fashionable weeklies, as a member of the family, at the Liggett-Melrose wedding; to have clothes and motor-cars, and a bedroom that was like a picture; to know Newport at first-hand; to have cruised for a week in the Craigies' yacht, and have driven to Quebec and back in the Von Behrens' car? A year ago, she reminded herself, it would have seemed Paradise to have had even a week's freedom from the bookshop; now, she need never step into Biretta's again!

But it was not enough, and Norma would come impatiently to the end of her pondering with the same fretted sense of dissatisfaction. It was not enough to be tremulously praised by old Aunt Marianna, to be joked by Chris, greeted by Alice, his wife, with a friendly smile. Norma wanted to belong to this life, to be admired and sought by Leslie, rather than endured; to have the same easy familiarity with Duers, and Alexanders, and Rutgers that Leslie had.

As was quite natural, she and Leslie had eyed each other, from the very beginning, somewhat as rivals. But Leslie, even then preparing for her marriage, had so obviously held all the advantages, that her vague resentment and curiosity concerning the family's treatment of the unknown newcomer were brief. If Aunt Alice liked Norma to come in and talk books and write notes, if Chris chose to be gallant, if Grandma lavished an unusual affection upon this new protégée, well, it robbed Leslie of nothing, after all.

But with Norma it was different. She was brought into sharp contact with another girl, only slightly her senior, who had everything that this new turn of for-

tune had given Norma herself, and a thousand times more. Norma saw older women, the important and influential matrons of the social world, paying court to the promised wife of Acton Liggett. Norma knew that while Alice and Chris were always attentive to her own little affairs, the solving of Leslie's problems they regarded as their own sacred obligation. Norma had hours and hours of this new enchanting leisure to fill; she could be at anybody's beck and call. But Leslie, she saw, was only too busy. Everybody was claiming Leslie; she was needed in forty places at once; she must fly from one obligation to another, and be thanked for sparing just a few minutes here and there from her crowded days.

Mrs. Melrose had immediately made Norma an allowance, an allowance so big that when Norma first told Aunt Kate about it, it was with a sense of shame. Norma had her check-book, and need ask nobody for spending money. More than that her generous old patron insisted that she use all the family charge accounts freely: "You mustn't think of paying in any shop!" said Aunt Marianna and Aunt Alice, earnestly.

But Leslie was immensely rich in her own right. The hour in which Norma realized this was one of real wretchedness. Chris was her innocent informant.

It was only two or three days before the wedding, a warm day of rustling leaves and moving shadows, in late May. The united families were still in town, but plans for escape to the country were made for the very day after the event. Norma had been fighting a little sense of hurt pride because she was not to be included among Leslie's wedding attendants. She knew that Aunt Marianna had suggested it to Leslie, some weeks

before, and that the bride had quite justifiably reminded her grandmother that the eight maids, the special maid and matron of honour, and the two little pages, had all been already asked to perform their little service of affection, and that a readjustment now would be difficult. So Norma had been excluded from the luncheons, the discussions of frocks and bouquets, and the final exciting rehearsals in the big Park Avenue church.

She had chanced to be thinking of all these things on the day when Chris made a casual allusion to "needing" Leslie.

"The poor kid has got a stupid morning coming to-morrow, I'm afraid!" he had said, adding, in answer to Norma's raised eyebrows, "Business. She has to sign some papers, and alter her will—and I want all that done before they go away!"

"Has Leslie a will?" Norma had asked.

"My child, what did you suppose she had? Leslie inherited practically all of her Grandfather Melrose's estate. At least, her father, Theodore, did, and Leslie gets it direct through him. Of course your Aunt Annie got her slice, and my wife hers, but the bulk was left to the son. Poor Teddy! he didn't get much out of it. But during her minority the executors—of which I happen to be one—almost doubled it for Leslie. And to-morrow Judge Lee and I have got to go over certain matters with her."

He had been idling at the piano, while Alice dozed in the heat, and Norma played with a magazine. Now he had turned back to his music, and Norma had apparently resumed her reading. But she really had been shaken by a storm of passionate jealousy.

Jealousy is in its nature selfish, and the old Norma of Aunt Kate's little group had not been a selfish girl. But Norma had had a few weeks now of a world governed by a different standard. There was no necessity here, none of the pure beauty of sacrifice and service and insufficiency. This was a world of superfluities, a standard of excess. To have merely meals, clothing, comfort, and ease was not enough here. All these must be had in superabundance, and she was the best woman and the happiest who had gowns she could not wear, jewels lying idle, money stored away in banks, and servants standing about uselessly for hours, that the momentary needs of them might be instantly met.

The poison of this creed had reached Norma, in spite of herself. She was young, and she had always been beloved in her own group for what she honestly gave of cheer and service and friendship. It hurt her that nobody needed what she could give now, and she hated the very memory of Leslie's wedding.

But when that was over, Mrs. Melrose had taken her to Newport, whither Alice was carefully moved every June. Leslie was gone now, and Norma free from pricking reminders of her supremacy, and as old friends of Mrs. Melrose began to include her in the summer's merrymaking, she had some happy times. But even here the cloven hoof intruded.

Norma had always imagined this group as being full of friendly women and admiring men, as offering her a hundred friendships where the old life had offered one. She discovered slowly, and with pained surprise, that although there were plenty of girls, they were not especially anxious for intimacy with her, and that the

men she met were not, somehow, "real." They were absorbed in amusement, polo and yachting, they moved about a great deal, and they neither had, nor desired to have, any genuine work or interest in life. She began to see Leslie's wisdom in making an early and suitable marriage. As a matron, Leslie was established; she could entertain, she had dignified duties and interests, and while Norma felt awkward and bashful in asking young men to dine with Aunt Marianna, Acton brought his friends to his home, and Leslie had her girl friends there, and the whole thing was infinitely simpler and pleasanter.

CHAPTER XI

Norma had indeed chanced to make one girl friend, and one of whom Leslie and Alice, and even Annie, heartily approved. Caroline, the seventeen-year-old daughter of the Peter Craigies, was not a débutante yet, but she would be the most prominent, because the richest, of them all next winter. Caroline was a heavy-lidded, slow-witted girl, whose chief companions in life had been servants, foreign-born governesses, and music-masters. Norma had been seated next to her at the international tennis tournament, and had befriended the squirming and bashful Caroline from sheer goodness of heart. They had criticized the players, and Caroline had laughed the almost hysteric, shaken laugh that so worried her mother, and had blurted confidences to Norma in her childish way.

The next day there had been an invitation for Norma to lunch with Caroline, and Mrs. von Behrens had promptly given another luncheon for both girls. Norma was pleased, for a few weeks, with her first social conquest, but after that Caroline became a dead weight upon her. She hated the flattery, the inanities, the utter dulness of the great Craigie mansion, and she began to have a restless conviction that time spent with Caroline was time lost.

The friendship had cost her dear, too. Norma hated, even months later to remember just what she had paid for it.

In August a letter from Rose had reached her at Newport, announcing Rose's approaching marriage. Harry Redding's sister Mary was engaged to a most satisfactory young man of Italian lineage, one Joe Popini, and Mrs. Redding would hereafter divide her time between the households of her daughter and her son. Harry, thus free to marry, had persuaded Rose to wait no longer; the event was to be on a Monday not quite two weeks ahead, and Norma was please, *please*, PLEASE to come down as soon as she could.

Norma had read this letter with a sensation of pain at her heart. She felt so far away from them nowadays; she felt almost a certain reluctance to dovetail this life of softness and perfume and amusement in upon the old life. But she would go. She would go, of course!

And then she had suddenly remembered that on the Monday before Rose's wedding, the Craigies' splendid yacht was to put to sea for a four- or five-days' cruise, and that Caroline had asked her to go—the only other young person besides the daughter of the house. And great persons were going, visiting nobility from England, a young American Crœsus and his wife, a tenor from the Metropolitan. Annie had been delighted with this invitation; even Leslie, just returned from California and Hawaii, had expressed an almost surprised satisfaction in the Craigies' friendliness.

If they got back Friday night, then Norma could go down to the city early Saturday morning, and have two days with Rose and Aunt Kate. But if the yacht did not return until Saturday—well, even then there would be time. She and Rose could get through a tremendous lot of talking in twenty-four hours.

And the voyage certainly would not be prolonged over Saturday, for had not Mrs. Craigie said, in Norma's hearing, that Saturday was the very latest minute to which she could postpone the meeting for the big charity lawn party?

So Norma and the enslaved Caroline continued to plan for their sea trip, and Norma commissioned Chris to order Rose's wedding present at Gorham's.

Mrs. von Behrens had been a trifle distant with the newcomer in the family until now, but the day before the cruise began she extended just a little of her royal graciousness toward Norma. Like Leslie, Norma admired her Aunt Annie enormously, and hungered for her most casual word.

"You've plenty of frocks, Kiddie?" asked Annie. "One uses them up at the rate of about three a day!"

"Oh!"—Norma widened her innocent eyes—"I've a wardrobe trunk full of them: white skirts and white shoes and hats!"

"Well, I didn't suppose you had them tied in a handkerchief!" Annie had responded, with her quiet smile. "See if that fits you!"

They had been up in Mrs. von Behrens's big bedroom, where that lady was looking at a newly arrived box of gowns. "That" was the frail, embroidered coat of what Norma thought the prettiest linen suit she had ever seen.

"It's charming on you, you little slender thing," Annie had said. "The skirt will be too long; will you pin it, Keating? And see that it goes at once to my mother's house."

Keating had pinned, admired. And Norma, turning herself before the mirror, with her eyes shy with

pleasure and gratitude, had known that she was gaining ground.

So they had started radiantly on the cruise. But after the first few miraculous hours of gliding along beneath the gay awnings that had all been almost astonishingly disappointing, too. Caroline, to begin with, was a dreadful weight upon her young guest. Caroline for breakfast, luncheon, and dinner; Caroline retiring and rising, became almost hateful. Caroline always wanted to do something, when Norma could have dreamed and idled in her deck chair by the hour. It must be deck golf or deck tennis, or they must go up and tease dignified and courteous Captain Burns, "because he was such an old duck," or they must harass one or two of the older people into bridge. Norma did not play bridge well, and she hated it, and hated Caroline's way of paying for her losses almost more than paying them herself.

Norma could not lie lazily with her book, raising her eyes to the exquisite beauty of the slowly tipping sea, revelling in coolness and airiness, because Caroline, fussing beside her, had never read a book through in her life. The guest did not know, even now, that Caroline had been a mental problem for years, that Caroline's family had consulted great psycho-analysts about her, and had watched the girl's self-centredness, her odd slyness, her hysteric emotions, with deep concern. She did not know, even now, that the Cragies were anxious to encourage this first reaching out, in Caroline, toward a member of her own sex, and that her fancies for members of the opposite sex—for severely indifferent teachers, for shocked and unresponsive chauffeurs—were among the family prob-

lems, a part of the girl's unfortunate under-development. Caroline's family was innocently surprised to realize that her mind had not developed under the care of maids who were absorbed in their own affairs, and foreigners who would not have been free to attend her had they not been impecunious and unsuccessful in more lucrative ways. They had left her to Mademoiselles and Fräuleins quite complacently, but they did not wish her to be like these too-sullen or too-vivacious ladies.

So they welcomed her friendship with Norma, and Caroline's passionate desire to be with her friend was not to find any opposition on the part of her own family. Little Miss Sheridan had an occasional kindly word from Caroline's mother, a stout woman, middle-aged at thirty-five, and good-natured smiles from Caroline's father, a well-groomed young man. And socially, this meant that the Melroses' young protégée was made.

But Norma did not realize all this. She only knew that all the charm and beauty of the yacht were wasted on her. Everyone ate too much, talked too much, played, flirted, and dressed too much. The women seldom made their appearance until noon; in the afternoons there was bridge until six, and much squabbling and writing of checks on the forward deck, with iced drinks continually being brought up from the bar. At six the women loitered off to dress for dinner, but the men went on playing for another half hour. The sun sank in a blaze of splendour; the wonderful twilight fell; but the yacht might have been boxed up in an armoury for all that her passengers saw of the sea.

After the elaborate dinner, with its ices and hot rolls, its warm wines and chilled champagne, cards began

again, and unless the ocean was so still that they might dance, bridge continued until after midnight.

Norma's happiest times had been when she arose early, at perhaps seven, and after dressing noiselessly in their little bathroom, crept upstairs without waking Caroline. Sunshine would be flooding the ocean, or perhaps the vessel would be nosing her way through a luminous fog—but it was always beautiful. The decks, drying in the soft air, would be ordered, inviting, deserted. Great waves of smooth water would flow evenly past, curving themselves with lessening ripples into the great even circle of the sea. A gentle breeze would stir the leaves of the potted plants on the deck and flap the fringes of the awnings.

Norma, hanging on the railing, would look down upon a group of maids and stewards laughing and talking on the open deck below. These were happy, she would reflect, animated by a thousand honest emotions that never crept to the luxurious cabins above. They would be waiting for breakfast, all freshly aproned and brushed, all as pleased with the *Seagirl* as if they had been her owners.

On the fifth day, Friday, she had been almost sick with longing to hear some mention of going back. Surely—surely, she reasoned, they had all said that they must get back on Friday night! If the plan had changed, Norma had determined to ask them to run into harbour somewhere, and put her on shore. She was so tired of Caroline, so tired of wasting time, so headachy from the heavy meals and lack of exercise!

Late on Friday afternoon some idle remark of her hostess had assured her that the yacht would not make Greble light until Monday. They were ploughing

north now, to play along the Maine coast; the yachting party was a great success, and nobody wanted to go home.

Norma, goaded out of her customary shyness, had pleaded her cousin's marriage. Couldn't they run into Portland—or somewhere?—and let her go down by train? But Caroline had protested most affectionately and noisily against this, and Caroline's mother said sweetly that she couldn't think of letting Norma do that alone—Annie von Behrens would never forgive her! However, she would speak to Captain Burns, and see what could be done. Anyway, Mrs. Craigie had finished, with her comfortable laugh, Norma had only to tell her cousin that she was out with friends on their yacht, and they had been delayed. Surely that was excuse enough for any one?

It was with difficulty that Norma had kept the tears out of her eyes. She had not wanted an excuse to stay away from Rose's wedding. Her heart had burned with shame and anger and helplessness. She could hardly believe, crying herself to sleep on Friday night, that two whole days were still to spare before Monday, and that she was helpless to use them. Her mind worked madly, her thoughts rushing to and fro with a desperation worthy an actual prisoner.

On Saturday evening, after a day of such homesickness and heavy-heartedness as she had never known before in her life, she had realized that they were in some port, lying a short half mile from shore.

It was about ten o'clock, warm and starlighted; there was no moon. Norma had slipped from the deck, where Caroline was playing bridge, and had gone to the lowered gang-plank. Captain Burns was there,

going over what appeared to be invoices, with the head steward.

"Captain," Norma had said, her heart pounding, "can't you put me on shore? I must be in New York to-morrow—it's very important! If I get a coat, will you let me go in when you go?"

He had measured her with his usual polite, impersonal gaze.

"Miss Sheridan, I really could not do it, Miss! If it was a telegram, or something of that sort—— But if anything was to happen to you, Miss, it would be—it really would be most unfortunate!"

Norma had stood still, choking. And in the starlight he had seen the glitter of tears in her eyes.

"Couldn't you put it to Mrs. Craigie, Miss? I'm sure she'd send someone—one of the maids——"

But Norma shook her head. It would anger Caroline, and perhaps Caroline's mother, and Annie, too, to have her upset the cruise by her own foolish plans. There was no hope of her hostess's consent. What!—send a girl of eighteen down to New York for dear knows what fanciful purpose, without a hint from parent or guardian? Mrs. Craigie knew the modern girl far too well for that, even if it had not been personally extremely inconvenient to herself to spare a maid. They were rather short of maids, for two or three of them had been quite ill.

The launch had put off, with Captain Burns in the stern. Norma had stood watching it, with her heart of lead. Oh, to be running away—flying—on the train—in the familiar streets! They could forgive her later—or never——

"Norma, aren't you naughty?" Caroline had in-

terrupted her thoughts, and had slipped a hand through her arm. "Buoso is going to sing—do come in! My dear, you know that last hand? Well, we made it——!"

The next two days were the slowest, the hardest, the bitterest of Norma's life. She felt that nobody had ever had to bear so aching a heart as hers, as the most beautiful yacht in the world skimmed over the blue ocean, and the sun shone down on her embroidered linen suit, and her white shoes, and the pearl ring that Caroline had given her for her birthday.

What were they doing at Aunt Kate's? What were they saying as the hours went by? At what stage was the cake—and the gown? Was Rose really to be married to-morrow—to-day?

In New Brunswick she had managed to send a long wire, full of the disappointment and affection and longing she truly felt, and after that she had been happier. But it was a very subdued little Norma who had come quietly into Aunt Kate's kitchen three weeks later, and had relieved her over-charged heart with a burst of tears on Aunt Kate's shoulder.

Aunt Kate had been kind, kind as she always was to the adored foster-child. And Norma had stayed to dinner, and made soft and penitent eyes at Wolf until the agonized resolutions of the past lonely months had all melted out of his heart again, and they had all gone over to Rose's, for five minutes of kissing and crying, before the big car came to carry Norma away.

So the worst of that wound was healed, and life could become bright and promising to Norma once more. Autumn was an invigorating season, anyway, full of hope and enchantment, and Caroline Craigie, by what Norma felt to be a special providence, was

visiting her grandmother in Baltimore for an indefinite term. The truth was that there was a doctor there whose advice was deemed valuable to Caroline, but Norma did not know that. Norma did not know the truth, either, about Mrs. von Behrens's sudden graciousness toward her, but it made her happy. Annie had become friendly and hospitable toward the newcomer in the family for only one reason. As a social dictator, she was accustomed to be courted and followed by scores of women who desired her friendship for the prestige it gave them. Annie was extremely autocratic in this respect, and could snub, chill, and ignore even the most hopeful aspirants to her favour, with the ease of long practice. It made no difference to Annie that dazzling credentials were produced, or that past obscurity was more than obliterated by present glory.

"One truly must be firm," Annie frequently said. "It devolves upon a few of us, as an actual duty, to see that society is maintained in its true spirit. Let the bars down once——!"

Norma, a negligible factor in Annie's life when she first appeared, had quite innocently become a problem during that first summer. While not a Melrose, she was a member of the Melrose family, making her home with one of the daughters of the house. Annie might ignore Norma, but there were plenty of women, and men, too, who saw in the girl a valuable social lever. To become intimate with little Miss Sheridan meant that one might go up to her, at teas and dinners, while she was with Mrs. Melrose, or young Mrs. Liggett, or even Mrs. von Behrens herself, in a casual, friendly manner that indicated, to a watching world, a comforta-

ble footing with the family. Norma was consequently selected for social attention.

Annie saw this immediately, and when all the families were settled in town again, she decided to take Norma's social training in hand, as she had done Leslie's, and make sure that no undesirable cockle was sown among the family fields. She would have done exactly the same if Norma had been the least attractive of girls, but Norma fancied that her own qualities had won Annie's reluctant friendship, and was accordingly pleased.

CHAPTER XII

EIGHT months later, in the clear sunshine of a late autumn morning, a slender young woman came down the steps of the Melrose house, after an hour's call on the old mistress, and turned briskly toward Fifth Avenue. In figure, in carriage, and even in the expression of her charming and animated face, she was different from the girl who had come to that same house to make a call with Aunt Kate, on the day after the big blizzard, yet it was the same Norma Sheridan who nodded a refusal to the driver of the big motor-car that was waiting, and set off by herself for her walk.

The old Norma, straight from Biretta's Bookshop, had been pretty in plain serge and shabby fur. But this Norma—over whose soft thick belted coat a beautiful silver-fox skin was linked, whose heavy, ribbed silk hose disappeared into slim, flat, shining pumps that almost caressed the slender foot, whose dark hair had the lustre that comes from intelligent care, and whose handsome little English hat was the only one of its special cut in the world—was a conspicuously attractive figure even in a world of well-groomed girls, and almost deserved to be catalogued as a beauty. From the hat to the shoes she was palpably correct, and Norma knew, and never could quite sufficiently revel in the knowing, that the blouse and the tailored skirt that were under the coat were correct, too, and that under blouse and skirt were cobwebby linens

and perfumed ribbons and sheerest silks that were equally perfect in their way. Leslie's bulldog, pulling on his strap, kept her moving rapidly, and girl and dog exacted from almost all the passers-by that tribute of glances to which Norma was now beginning to be accustomed.

She was walking to Mrs. von Behrens's after an unusually harmonious luncheon with old Mrs. Melrose. This was one of Norma's happy times, and she almost danced in the crisp November air that promised snow even now. Leslie had asked her to come informally to tea; Annie had sent a message that she wished to see Norma; and Alice, who, like all invalids, had dark moods of which only her own household was aware, had been her nicest self for a week. Then Christopher was coming home to-night, and Norma had missed him for the three weeks he had been away, duck-shooting in the South, and liked the thought that he was homeward bound.

She found Leslie with Annie to-day, in Annie's big front bedroom. Leslie was in a big chair by the bed where Annie, with some chalky preparation pasted in strips on those portions of her face that were most inclined to wrinkle, was lying flat. Her hair, rubbed with oils and packed in tight bands, was entirely invisible, and over her arms, protruding from a gorgeous oriental wrap, loose chamois gloves were drawn. Annie had been to a luncheon, and was to appear at two teas, a dinner, and the theatre, and she was making the most of an interval at home. She looked indescribably hideous, as she stretched a friendly hand toward Norma, and nodded toward a chair.

"Look at the child's colour—Heavens! what it is

to be young," said Annie. "Sit down, Norma. How's Alice?"

"Lovely!" Norma said, pulling off her gloves. "She had a wire from Chris, and he gets back to-night. I had luncheon with your mother, and I am to go to stay with her for two or three nights, anyway. But Aunt Alice said that she would like to have me back again next week for her two teas."

"How old are you, Norma?" Annie asked, suddenly. Any sign of interest on her part always thrilled the girl, who answered, flushing:

"Nineteen; twenty in January, Aunt Annie."

"I'm thinking, if you'd like it, of giving you a little tea here next month," Annie said, lazily. "You know quite enough of the youngsters now to have a thoroughly nice time, and afterward we'll have a dinner here, and they can dance!"

"Oh, Aunt Annie—if I'd like it!" Norma exclaimed, rosy with pleasure.

"You would?" Annie asked, looking at a hand from which she had drawn the glove, and smiling slightly. "It means that you don't go anywhere in the meantime. You're not out until then, you know!"

"Oh, but I won't be going anywhere, anyway," Norma conceded, contentedly.

"You'll have a flood of invitations fast enough after the tea," Annie assured her, pleased at her excitement, "and until then, you can simply say that you are not going out yet."

"Chris said he might take me to the opera on the first night; I've never been," Norma said, timidly. "But I can explain to him!"

"Oh, that won't count!" Annie assured her, care-

lessly. "We'll all be there, of course! Have you worn the corn-coloured gown yet?"

"Oh, no, Aunt Annie!"

"Well, keep it for that night. And you and Chris might—— No, he'll want to dine with Alice, and she'll want to see you in your new gown. I was going to say that you might dine here, but you'd better not."

"I think Leslie and Acton are going to be asked to dine with us," Norma said. "Aunt Alice said something about it!"

"Well," Annie agreed indifferently. "Ring that bell, Norma—I've got to get up! Where are you girls going now?"

"Some of the girls are coming to my house for tea," Leslie answered, listlessly. "I've got the car here. Come on, Norma!"

"But you're not driving, Kiddie?" her aunt asked, quickly.

Leslie, who neither looked nor felt well, raised half-resentful eyes.

"Oh, no, I'm not driving, and I'm lying in bed mornings, and I don't play squash, or ride horseback, or go in for tennis!" she drawled, half angrily. "I'm having a perfectly *lovely* time! I wish Acton had a little of it; he wouldn't be so pleased! Makes me so mad," grumbled Leslie, as she wandered toward the door, busily buttoning her coat. "Grandma crying with joy, and Aunt Alice goo-gooing at me, and Acton——"

"Come, now, be a little sport, Leslie!" her aunt urged, affectionately, with her arm about her. "It's rotten, of course, but after all, it does mean a lot to the Liggetts——"

"Oh, now, don't *you* begin!" Leslie protested, half-mollified, with her parting nod. "Don't—for pity's sake!—talk about it," she added, rudely, to Norma, as Norma began some consolatory murmur on the stairs. But when they were before her own fire, waiting for the expected girls, she made Norma a rather ungracious confidence.

"I don't want Aunt Alice or any one to know it, but if Acton Liggett thinks I am going to let him make an absolute fool of me, he's mistaken!" Leslie said, in a sort of smouldering resentment.

"What has Acton done?" Norma asked, flattered by the intimation of trust and not inclined to be apprehensive. She had seen earlier differences between the young married pair, and now, when Leslie was physically at a disadvantage, she and Alice had agreed that it was not unnatural that the young wife should grow exacting and fanciful.

"Acton is about the most selfish person I ever knew," Leslie said, almost with a whimper. "Oh, yes, he is, Norma! You don't see it—but I do! Chris knows it, too; I've heard Chris call him down a thousand times for it! I am just boiling at Acton; I have been all day! He leaves everything to me, everything; and I'm not well, now, and I can't stand it! And I'll tell him I can't, too."

"I suppose a man doesn't understand very well," Norma ventured.

"*He* doesn't!" Leslie said, warmly. "All Acton Liggett thinks of is his own comfort—that's all! I do everything for him—I pay half the expenses here, you know, more than half, really, for I always pay for my own clothes and Milly, and lots of other things. And

then he'll do some *mean*, ugly thing that just makes me furious at him—and he'll walk out of the house, perfectly calm and happy!"

"He's always had his own way a good deal," Norma who knew anything except sympathy would utterly exasperate Leslie conceded, mildly.

"Yes," Leslie agreed, flushing, and stiffening her jaw rather ominously, "and it's just about time that he learned that he isn't always going to have it, too! It's very easy for him to have me do anything that is hard and stupid—— Do you suppose," she broke off, suddenly, "that *I'm* so anxious to go to the Duers' dinner? I wouldn't care if I never saw one of them again!"

Norma gathered that a dinner invitation from the Duers had been the main cause of the young Liggetts' difference, and framed a general question.

"That's Saturday night?"

"Friday," Leslie amended. "And what does he do? He meets Roy Duer at the club, and says oh, no, he can't come to the dinner Friday, but *Leslie* can! He has promised to play bridge with the Jeromes and that crowd. But Leslie would *love* to go! So there I am—old lady Duer called me up the next morning, and was so sorry Acton couldn't come! But she would expect me at eight o'clock. It's for her daughter, and she goes away again on Tuesday. And then"—Leslie straightened herself on the couch, and fixed Norma with bright, angry eyes—"then Spooky Jerome telephoned here, and said to tell Acton that if he couldn't stir up a bridge party for Friday, he'd stir up something, and for Acton to meet him at the club!"

Norma laughed.

"And did you give Acton that message?" she inquired.

"No, indeed, I didn't—that was only this morning!" Leslie said, in angry satisfaction. "I telephoned Mrs. Duer right away, and said that Acton would be so glad to come Friday, and if Acton Liggett doesn't like it, he knows what he can do! You laugh," she went on with a sort of pathetic dignity, "but don't you think it's a rotten way for a man to treat his wife, Norma? Don't you, honestly? There's nothing—nothing that I don't give way in—absolutely nothing! And I don't believe most men—— Oh, hello, Doris," Leslie broke off, gaily, as there was a stir at the door; "come in! Come in, Vera—aren't you girls angels to come in and see the poor old sick lady!"

Norma was still lingering when Acton came home, an hour later. She heard his buoyant voice in the hall, and began to gather her wraps and gloves as he came to the tea table.

"Acton," Leslie said, firmly, "the bridge party is off for Friday, and you're going to Mrs. Duer's with me, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Whew! I can see that I'm popular in the home circle, Norma!" Acton said, leaning over the big davenport to kiss his wife. "How's my baby? All right, dear, anything you say goes! I was going to cancel the game, anyway. Look what Chris brought you, Cutey-cute! Say, Norma, has she been getting herself tired?"

Leslie, instantly mollified, drew his cold, firm cheek against hers, and looked sidewise toward Norma.

"Isn't he the nice, big, comfy man to come home to his mad little old wife?" she mumbled, luxuriously.

"Yes," Acton grumbled, still half embracing her, "but you didn't talk that way at breakfast, you little devil!"

"Am I a devil?" Leslie asked, lazily. And looking in whimsical penitence at Norma, she added, "I *am* a devil. But you were just as mean as you could be," she told him, widening her eyes and shaking her head.

"I know it. I felt like a dog, walking down town," her husband admitted promptly. "I tried to telephone but you weren't here!"

"I was at Aunt Annie's," Leslie said, softly. Her husband had slipped in beside her on the wide davenport, and she was resting against his shoulder, and idly kissing the little rebel lock of hair that fell across one temple. "He's a pretty nice old husband!" she murmured, contentedly.

"And she's a pretty nice little wife, if she did call me some mean names!" Acton returned, kissing the top of her head without altering her position. Norma looked at them with smiling contempt.

"You're a great pair!" she conceded, indulgently.

Leslie now was free to examine, with a flush and a laugh, the microscopic pair of beaded Indian moccasins that Chris had brought from Florida. Norma asked about Chris.

"Oh, he's fine," Acton answered, "looks brown and hard; he had a gorgeous time! He said he might be round to see Grandma to-morrow morning!"

"I'll tell her," Norma said, getting up to go. She left them still clinging together, like a pair of little love-birds, with peace fully restored for the time being.

Mrs. Melrose's car had been waiting for some time, and she was whirled home through the dark and wintry

streets without the loss of a second. Lights were lighted everywhere now, and tempered radiance filled the old hall as she entered it. It was just six o'clock, but Norma knew that she and the old lady were to be alone to-night, and she went through the long drawing-room to the library beyond it, thinking she might find her still lingering over the teacups. Dinner under these circumstances was usually at seven, and frequently Mrs. Melrose did not change her gown for it.

There was lamplight in the library, but the old lady's chair was empty, and the tea table had been cleared away. Norma, supposing the room unoccupied, gave a little gasp of surprise and pleasure as Chris suddenly got to his feet among the shadows.

She was so glad to see him, so much more glad than she would have imagined herself, that for a few minutes she merely clung tight to the two hands she had grasped, and stood laughing and staring at him. Chris back again! It meant so much that was pleasant and friendly to Norma. Chris advised her, admired her, sympathized with her; above all, she knew that he liked her.

"Chris; it's so nice to see you!" she exclaimed.

The colour came into his face, and with it an odd expression that she had never seen there before. Without speaking he put his arm about her, and drew her to him, and kissed her very quietly on the mouth.

"Hello, you dear little girl!" he said, freeing her, and smiling at her, somewhat confusedly. "You're not half so glad to see me as I am to be back! You're looking so well, Norma," he went on, with almost his usual manner, "and Alice tells me you are making friends everywhere. What's the news?"

He threw himself into a large leather chair, and, hardly knowing what she was doing, in the wild hurrying of her senses, Norma sat down opposite him. Her one flurried impulse was not to make a scene. Chris was always so entirely master of a situation, so utterly unemotional and self-possessed, that if he kissed her, upon his return from a three-weeks' absence, it must be a perfectly correct thing to do.

Yet she felt both shaken and protestant, and it was with almost superhuman control that she began to carry on a casual conversation, giving her own report upon Alice and Leslie, Acton and the world in general.

When Mrs. Melrose, delighted at the little attention from her son-in-law, came smilingly in, five minutes later, Norma escaped upstairs. She had Leslie's old room here when she spent the night, but it was only occasionally that Alice spared her, for her youth and high spirits, coupled with the simplicity and enthusiasm with which she was encountering the new world, made her a really stimulating companion for the sick woman.

Regina came in to hook her into a simple dinner gown, but Norma did not once address her, except by a vague smile of greeting. Her thoughts were in a whirl. Why had he done that? Was it just brotherly —friendliness? He was much older than she—thirty-seven or eight; perhaps he had felt only an older man's kindly——

But her face blazed, and she flung this explanation aside angrily. He had no business to do it! He had no right to do it! She was furious at him!

She stood still, staring blankly ahead of her, in the centre of the room. The memory came over her in a

wave; the odd, half-hesitating, half-confident look in his eyes as his arms enveloped her, the faint aroma of talcum powder and soap, the touch of his smoothly shaven cheek.

It was almost an hour later that she went cautiously downstairs. He was gone—had been gone since half-past six o'clock, Joseph reported. Norma went in to dinner with Mrs. Melrose, and they talked cheerfully of Chris's return, of Leslie and Annie.

By eight o'clock, reading in Mrs. Melrose's upstairs sitting-room, that first room that she had seen in this big house, eight months ago, Norma began to feel just a trifle flat. Chris Liggett was one of the most popular men in society, in demand everywhere, spoiled by women everywhere. He had quite casually, and perhaps even absent-mindedly, kissed his wife's young protégée upon meeting her after an absence, and she had hastily leaped to conclusions worthy of a schoolgirl! He would be about equally amused and disgusted did he suspect them.

"He likes you, you little fool," Norma said to herself, "and you will utterly spoil everything with your idiocy!"

"What did you say, lovey?" the old lady asked, half closing her book.

"Nothing!" Norma said, laughing. She reopened her novel, and tried to interest herself in it. But the thought of that quarter hour in the study came back over and over again. She came finally to the conclusion that she was glad Chris liked her.

The room was very still. A coal fire was glowing pink and clear in the grate, and now and then the radiators hissed softly. Norma had one big brilliant lamp

to herself, and over the old lady's chair another glowed. Everything was rich, soft, comfortable. Regina was hovering in the adjoining room, folding the fat satin comforters, turning down the transparent linen sheets with their great scroll of monogram, and behind Regina were Joseph and Emma, and all the others, and behind them the great city and all the world, eager to see that this old woman, who had given the world very little real service in her life, should be shielded and warmed and kept from the faintest dream of need.

Money was a strange thing, Norma mused. What should she do, if—as her shamed and vague phrase had it—if "something happened" to Aunt Marianna, and she was not even mentioned in her will? Of course it was a hateful thing to think of, and a horrible thing, sitting here opposite Aunt Marianna in the comfortable upstairs sitting-room, but the thought would come. Norma wished that she knew. She would not have shortened the old lady's life by a single second, and she would have died herself rather than betray this thought to any one, even to Wolf—even to Rose! But it suddenly seemed to her very unjust that she could be picked out of Biretta's bookstore to-day, by Aunt Marianna's pleasure, and perhaps put back there to-morrow through no fault of her own. They were all kind, they were all generous, but this was not just. She wanted the delicious and self-respecting feeling of being a young woman with "independent means."

Such evenings as this one, even in the wonderful Melrose house, were undeniably dull. She and Rose had often grumbled, years ago, because there were so many of these quiet times, in between the Saturday

and Sunday excitements. But Norma, in those days, had never supposed that dulness was ever compatible with wealth and ease.

"Cards?" said old Mrs. Melrose, hopefully, as the girl made a sudden move. She loved to play patience, but only when she had an audience. Norma, who had just decided to give her French verbs a good hour's attention, smiled amiably, and herself brought out the green table. She sat watching the fall of kings and aces, reminding her companion of at least every third play. But her thoughts went back to Chris, and the faint odour of powder and soap, and the touch of his shaved cheek.

CHAPTER XIII

NORMA met Chris again no later than the following afternoon. It was twilight in Alice's room, and she and Norma were talking on into the gloom, discussing the one or two guests who had chanced to come in for tea, and planning the two large teas that Alice usually gave some time late in November.

Chris came in quietly, kissed his wife, and nodded carelessly to Norma. The girl's sudden mad heart-beats and creeping colour could subside together unnoticed, for he apparently paid no attention to her, and presently drifted to the piano, leaving the women free to resume their conference.

Alice was a person of more than a surface sweetness; she loved harmony and serenity, and there was almost no inclination to irritability or ugliness in her nature. Her voice was always soothing and soft, and her patience in the unravelling of other people's problems was inexhaustible. Alice was, as all the world conceded, an angel.

But Norma had not been a member of her household for eight months without realizing that Alice, like other household angels, did not wish an understudy in the rôle. She did not quite enjoy the nearness of another woman who might be all sweet and generous and peace-making, too. That was her own sacred and peculiar right. She could gently and persistently urge objections and find inconsistencies in any plan

of her sister or of Norma, no matter how advantageous it sounded, and she could adhere to a plan of her own with a tenacity that, taken in consideration with Alice's weak body and tender voice, was nothing less than astonishing.

Norma, lessoned in a hard school, and possessing more than her share of adaptability and common sense, had swiftly come to the conclusion that, since it was not her part to adjust the affairs of her benefactors, she might much more wisely constitute herself a sort of Greek chorus to Alice's manipulations. Alice's motives were always of the highest, and it was easy to praise them in all honesty, and if sometimes the younger woman had mentally arrived at a conclusion long before Alice had patiently and sweetly reached it, the little self-control was not much to pay toward the comfort of a woman as heavily afflicted as Alice.

For Norma knew in her own heart that Alice was heavily afflicted, although the invalid herself always took the attitude that her helplessness brought the best part of life into her room, and shut away from her the tediousness and ugliness of the world.

"'Aïda' two weeks from to-night!" Alice said this evening, with her sympathetic smile.

"Oh, Aunt Alice—if you could go! Didn't you love it?"

"Love the opera? Do you hear her, Chris? But I didn't love people talking all about me—and they will do it, you know! And that makes one furious!"

"I see you getting furious," Norma observed, incredulously.

"You don't know me! But I was a bashful, adoring sort of little person, on my first night——"

"Yes, you were," Chris teased her, over a lazy ripple of thirds. "She was such a bashful little person at the Mardi Gras dance she promised Artie Peyton her first cotillion the following season."

"Oh, Aunt Alice—you didn't!"

Alice's rather colourless face flushed happily, and she half lowered her lids.

"Chris thinks that is a great story on me. As a matter of fact, I did do that; I was just childish enough. But I can't think how the story got out, for I was desperately ashamed of it."

"I told Aunt Annie and Leslie to-day that you wanted the Liggetts to dine here that night," Norma said, suddenly. Instantly she realized that she had made a mistake. And there was no one in the world whose light reproof hurt her as Alice's did.

"You—you gave my invitation to Leslie?" Alice asked, quietly.

"Well—not quite that. But I told her that you had said that you meant to ask them," Norma replied, uncomfortably.

"But, Norma, I did not ask you to mention it." Alice was even smiling, but she seemed a little puzzled.

"I'm so sorry—if you didn't want me to!"

"It isn't that. But one feels that one——"

"What is Norma sorry about?" Chris asked, coming back to the fire. "Norma, you're up against a terrible tribunal, here! Alice has been known—well, even to give new hats to the people who make her angry!"

This fortunate allusion to an event now some months old entirely restored Alice's good humour. Norma had accepted a certain almost-new hat from Leslie

just before the wedding, and Alice, burning with her secret suspicion as to Norma's parentage, and in the first flush of her affection for the girl, had told Norma that in her opinion Leslie should not have offered it. It was not for Norma to take any patronage from her cousin, Alice said to herself. But Norma's distress at having disappointed Alice was so fresh and honest that the episode had ended with Alice's presenting her with a stunning new hat, to wipe out the terrible effect of her mild criticism.

"You're a virago," said Chris, seating himself near his wife. "Tell me what you've been doing all day. Am I in for that dinner at Annie's to-night? I wish I could stay here and gossip with you girls."

"Dearest, you'd get so stupid, tied here to me, that you wouldn't know who was President of the United States!" Alice smiled. "Yes, I promised you to Annie two weeks ago. To-morrow night Norma goes to Leslie, and you and I have dinner all alone, so console yourself with that."

"*Très bien,*" Christopher agreed. And as if the phrase suggested it, he went on to test Norma's French. Norma was never self-conscious with him, and in a few seconds he and Alice were laughing at her earnest absurdities. When husband and wife went on into a conversation of their own, Norma sat back idly, conscious that the atmosphere was always easy and pleasant when Chris was at home, there were no petty tensions and no sensitive misconstructions while Chris was talking. Sometimes with Annie and Alice, and even with Leslie, Norma could be rapidly brought to the state of feeling prickly all over, afraid to speak, and equally uncomfortable in silence. But Chris always

smoothed her spirit into utter peace, and reëstablished her sense of proportion, her sense of humour.

Neither he nor Alice noticed her when she presently went away to change her gown for dinner, but when she came out of her room, half an hour later, Chris was just coming up to his. Their rooms were on the same floor—his the big front room, and hers one of the sunny small ones at the back of the house. Norma's and that of Miss Slater, Alice's nurse, were joined by a bathroom; Chris had his own splendid dressing-room and bath, fitted, like his bedroom, with rugs and chests and highboys worthy of a museum.

"Aren't you going to be late, Chris?" Norma asked, when they met at the top of the stairs. Fresh from a bath, with her rich dark hair pushed back in two shining wings from her smooth forehead, and her throat rising white and soft from the frills of a black lacy gown, she was the incarnation of youth and sweetness as she looked up at him. "Seven o'clock!" she reminded him.

For answer he surprised her by catching her hand, and staring gravely down at her.

"Were you angry at me, Norma?" he asked, in a quiet, businesslike voice.

"Angry?" she echoed, surprised. But her colour rose. "No, Chris. Why should I be?"

"There is no reason why you should be, of course," he answered, simply, almost indifferently. And immediately he went by her and into his room.

CHAPTER XIV

On the memorable night of her first grand opera Norma and Chris dined at Mrs. von Behrens's. It was Alice who urged the arrangement, urged it quite innocently, as she frequently did the accidental pairing of Norma and Chris, because her mother was going for a week to Boston, the following day, and they wanted an evening of comfortable talk together.

Norma, with Freda and Miss Slater as excited accomplices, laid out the new corn-coloured gown at about five o'clock in the afternoon, laid beside it the stockings and slippers that exactly matched it in colour, and hung over the foot of her bed the embroidered little stays that were so ridiculously small and so unnecessarily beautiful. On a separate chair was spread the big furred wrap of gold and brown brocade, the high carriage shoes, and the long white gloves to which the tissue paper still was clinging. The orchids that Annie had given Norma that morning were standing in a slender vase on the bureau, and as a final touch the girl, regarding these preparations with a sort of enchanted delight, unfurled to its full glory the great black ostrich-feather fan. Norma amused Alice and Mrs. Melrose by refusing tea, and disappeared long before there was need, to begin the great ceremony of robing.

Miss Slater manicured her hands while Freda brushed and dressed the dark thick hair. Between

Norma and the nurse there had at first been no special liking. Both were naturally candidates for Alice's favour. But as the months went by, and Norma began to realize that Miss Slater's position was not only far from the ideally beautiful one it had seemed at first, but that the homely, elderly, good-natured woman was actually putting herself to some pains to make Norma's own life in the Liggett house more comfortable than it might have been, she had come genuinely to admire Alice's attendant, and now they were fast friends. It was often in Norma's power to distract Alice's attention from the fact that Miss Slater was a little late in returning from her walk, or she would make it a point to order for the invalid something that Miss Slater had forgotten. They stood firmly together in many a small domestic emergency, and although the nurse's presence to-night was not, as Norma thought with a little pang, like having Rose or Aunt Kate with her, still it was much, much better than having no one at all.

She sat wrapped luxuriously in a brilliant kimono, while Freda brushed and rolled busily, and Miss Slater polished and clipped. Then ensued a period of intense concentration at the mirror, when the sparkling pins were put in her hair, and the little pearl earrings screwed into her ears, and when much rubbing and greasing and powdering went on, and even some slight retouching of the innocent, red young mouth.

"Shall I?" Norma asked, dubiously eyeing the effect of a trace of rouge.

"Don't be an idiot, Miss Sheridan!" Miss Slatter said. "You've got a lovely colour, and it's a shame to touch it!"

"Oh, but I think I look so pale!" Norma argued.

"Well, when you've had your dinner—— Now, you take my advice, my dear, and let your face alone."

"Well, all the girls do it," Norma declared, catching up the little girdle, and not unwilling to be over-persuaded. She gave an actual shiver of delight as Freda slipped the gown over her head.

It fell into shape about her, a miracle of cut and fit. The little satiny underskirt was heavy with beads, the misty cloud of gauze that floated above it was hardly heavy enough to hold its own embroideries. Little beaded straps held it to the flawless shoulders, and Norma made her two attendants laugh as she jerked and fussed at the gold lace and tiny satin roses that crossed her breast.

"Leave it alone!" Miss Slater said.

"Oh, but it seems so low!"

"Well, you may be very sure it isn't—Lenz knows what he's doing when he makes a gown. . . Here, now, what are you going to do with your flowers?"

"Oh, I'm going to wrap the paper round them, and carry them until just before I get to Aunt Annie's. Wouldn't you?"

"Wouldn't I? I like that!" said Miss Slater, settling her eyeglasses on the bridge of her nose with a finger and thumb. Norma had a momentary pang of sympathy; she could never have been made to understand that a happy barnyard duck may look contentedly up from her pool at the peacock trailing his plumes on the wall.

"Norma—for the love of Allah!" Chris shouted from downstairs.

Norma gave a panicky laugh, snatched her fan, wrap,

and flowers, and fled joyously down to be criticized and praised. On the whole, they were pleased with her: Alice, seizing a chance for an aside to tell her not to worry about the lowness of the gown, that it was absolutely correct she might be very sure, and Mrs. Melrose quite tremulously delighted with her ward. Chris did not say much until a few minutes before they planned to start, when he slipped a thin, flat gold watch from his vest pocket, and asked speculatively:

"Norma, has your Aunt Kate ever seen you in that rig?"

"No!" she answered, quickly. And then, with less sparkle, "No."

"Well, would you like to run in on her a moment?—she'd probably like it tremendously!" said Chris.

"Oh, Chris—I would love it!" Norma exclaimed, soberly, over a disloyal conviction that she would rather not. "But have we time?"

"Tons of time. Annie's dinners are a joke!"

Norma glanced at the women; Mrs. Melrose looked undecided, but Alice said encouragingly:

"I think that would be a sweet thing to do!"

So it was decided: and Norma was bundled up immediately, and called out excitedly laughing good-byes as Chris hurried her to the car.

"You know, it means a lot to your own people, really to see you this way, instead of always reading about it, or hearing about it!" Chris said, in his entirely prosaic, big-brotherly tone, as the car glided smoothly toward the West Sixties.

"I know it!" Norma agreed. "But I don't know how you do!" she added, in shy gratitude.

"Well, I'm nearly twice your age, for one thing,"

he replied, pleasantly. And as the car stopped unhesitatingly at the familiar door he added: "Now make this very snappy!"

She protested against his getting out, but he accompanied her all the way upstairs, both laughing like conspirators as they passed somewhat astonished residents of the apartment house on the way.

Aunt Kate and Wolf, and Rose and Harry, as good fortune would have it, were all gathered under the dining-room lamp, and there was a burst of laughter and welcome for Norma and "Mister Chris." Norma's wrap was tossed aside, and she revolved in all her glory, waving her fan at arm's length, pleasantly conscious of Wolf's utter stupefaction, and conscious, too, a little less pleasantly, that Aunt Kate's maternal eye did not agree with Aunt Annie's in the matter of *décolletage.*

Then she and Chris were on their way again, and the legitimate delights of being young and correctly dressed and dining with the great Mrs. von Behrens, and going to Grand Opera at the Metropolitan, might begin. Norma had perhaps never in her life been in such wild spirits as she was to-night. It was not happiness, exactly, not the happiness of a serene spirit and a quiet mind, for she was too nervous and too much excited to be really happy. But it was all wonderful.

She was the youngest person at the long dinner table, at which eighteen guests sat in such stately and such separated great carved chairs as almost to dine alone. Everyone was charmingly kind to the little Melrose protégée, who was to be introduced at a formal tea next week. The men were all older than Leslie's group and were neither afraid nor too selfishly wrapped up in their own narrow little circle to be polite. Norma

had known grown young men, college graduates, and the sons of prominent families, who were too entirely conventional to be addressed without an introduction, or to turn to a strange girl's rescue if she spilled a cup of tea. But there was none of that sort of thing here.

To be sure, Annie's men were either married, divorced, or too old to be strictly eligible in the eyes of unsophisticated nineteen, but that did not keep them from serving delightfully as dinner partners. Then Aunt Annie herself was delightful to-night, and joined in the general, if unexpressed, flattery that Norma felt in the actual atmosphere.

"Heavens—do you hear that, Ella?" said Annie, to an intimate and contemporary, when Norma shyly asked if the dress was all as it should be—if the—well, the neck, wasn't just a little——? "Heavens!" said Mrs. von Behrens, roundly, "if I had your shoulders—if I were nineteen again!—you'd see something a good deal more sensational than that!"

This was not the sort of thing one repeated to Aunt Kate. It was, like much of Annie's conversation, so daring as to be a little shocking. But Annie had so much manner, such a pleasant, assured voice, that somehow Norma never found it censurable in her.

To-night, for the first time, Hendrick von Behrens paid her a little personal attention. Norma had always liked the big, blond, silent man, with his thinning fair hair, and his affection for his sons. It was of his sons that he spoke to her, as he came up to her to-night.

"There are two little boys up in the nursery that don't want to go to sleep until Cousin Norma comes up to say good-night," said Hendrick, smiling indulgently. Norma turned willingly from Chris and two or three

other men and women; it was a privilege to be sufficiently at home in this magnificent place to follow her host up to the nursery upstairs, and be gingerly hugged by the little silk-pajamed boys.

Chris watched her go, the big fan and the blue eye and the delightful low voice all busy as she and Hendrick went away, and an odd thought came to him. That was her stepfather upon whom she was turning the battery of those lovely eyes; those little boys who were, he knew, jumping up and down in their little Dutch colonial beds, and calling "Norma—Norma—Norma!" were her half-brothers.

He glanced toward Annie; her beautiful figure wrapped in a sparkling robe that swept about her like a regal mantle, her fair hair scalloped like waves of carved gold, her fingers and throat and hair and ears sparkling with diamonds. Annie had on the famous Murison pearls, too, to-night; she was twisting them in her fingers as her creditable Italian delighted the ears of the Italian ambassador. Her own daughter to-night sat among her guests. Chris liked to think himself above surprise, but the strangeness of the situation was never absent a second from his thoughts. He drifted toward his hostess; he was proud of his own languages, and when Norma came back she came to stand wistfully beside them, wondering if ever—ever—ever—she would be able to do that!

It was all thrilling—exhilarating—wonderful! Norma's heart thumped delightfully as the big motor-cars turned into Broadway and took their place in the slowly moving line. She pressed her radiant face close to the window; snow was fluttering softly down in the darkness, and men were pushing it from the side-

walks, and shouting in the night. There was the usual fringe of onlookers in front of the opera house, and it required all Norma's self-control to seem quite naturally absorbed in getting herself safely out of the motor-car, and quite unconscious that her pretty ankles, and her pretty head, and the great bunched wrap, were not being generally appraised.

Women were stepping about gingerly in high heels; lights flashed on quivering aigrettes, on the pressed, intense faces of the watchers, and on the gently turning and falling snow, against the dark street. Norma was caught in some man's protecting arm, to push through into the churning crowd in the foyer; she had a glimpse of uniformed ushers and programme boys, of furred shoulders, of bared shoulders, of silk hats, of a sign that said: "Footmen Are Not Allowed in This Lobby."

Then somehow through, criss-crossed currents in the crowd, they reached the mysterious door of the box, and Norma saw for the first time the great, dimly lighted circle of the opera house, the enormous rise of balcony above balcony, the double tiers of boxes, and the rows of seats downstairs, separated by wide aisles, and rapidly filling now with the men and women who were coming down to their places almost on a run.

The orchestra was already seated, and as Norma stood awed and ecstatic in the front of the Von Behrens box, the conductor came in, and was met with a wave of applause, which had no sooner died away than the lights fanned softly and quickly down, there was the click of a baton on wood, and in the instantly ensuing hush the first quivering notes of the opera began.

"Sit down, you web-foot!" Acton Liggett whispered,

laughing, and Norma sank stiffly upon her chair, risking, as the curtain had not yet risen, a swift, bewildered smile of apology toward the dim forms that were rustling and settling behind her.

"Oo—oo—ooo!" was all that she could whisper when presently Chris murmured a question in her ear. And when the lights were on again, and the stars taking their calls, he saw that her face was wet, and her lashes were caught together with tears.

"It *is* wonderful music; the best of Verdi!" he said to Annie; and Annie, agreeing, sent him off with "that baby," to have her dry her eyes. Norma liked his not speaking to her, on her way to the great parlour where women were circling about the long mirrors, but when she rejoined him she was quite herself, laughing, excited, half dancing as he took her back to the box.

She sat down again, her beautiful little head, with its innocent sweep of smooth hair, visible from almost every part of the house, her questions incessant as the blue eyes and the great fan swept to and fro. Once, when she turned suddenly toward him, in the second entr'acte, she saw a look on Chris's face that gave her an odd second of something like fear, but the house darkened again before she could analyze the emotion, and Norma glued her eyes to the footlights.

What she did not see was a man, not quite at ease at his own first grand opera, not quite comfortable in his own first evening dress, lost—and willingly lost, among the hundreds who had come in just to stand far at the back, behind the seats, edging and elbowing each other, changing feet, and resting against any chair-back or column that offered itself, and sitting down, between acts, on the floor.

Wolf was not restless. He was strong enough to stand like an Indian, and tall enough to look easily over the surrounding heads. More than that, "Aïda" did not interest him in itself, and at some of its most brilliant passages he was guilty of slipping away to pace the hallways in solitude, or steal to the foyer for a brief cigarette. But when the house was lighted again, he went back into the auditorium, and then his eyes never left the little dark head of the girl who sat forward in one of the lower tier of boxes, waving her big fan, and talking over her bare shoulder to one or another of the persons beside or behind her.

CHAPTER XV

It was long afterward that Norma dated from the night of "Aïda" a new feeling in herself toward Chris, and the recognition of a new feeling in Chris toward her. She knew that a special sort of friendship existed between them from that time on.

He had done nothing definite that night; he had never done or said anything that could be held as marking the change. But Norma felt it, and she knew that he did. And somehow, in that atmosphere of fragrant flowers and women as fragrant, of rustling silks and rich furs, of music and darkness, and the old passion of the story, it had come to her for the first time that Chris was not only the Chris of Alice's room, Aunt Marianna's son-in-law and Leslie's brother-in-law, but her own Chris, too, a Chris who had his special meaning for her, as well as for the rest.

She liked him, it was natural that she should especially and truly like him. Almost all women did, for he was of the type that comes closest to understanding them, and he had made their favour an especial study. Chris could never be indifferent to any woman; if he did not actively dislike her, he took pains to please her, and, never actively disliking Norma, he had from the first constituted himself her guide and friend.

Long before he was conscious that there was a real charm to this little chance member of their group, Norma had capitulated utterly. His sureness, his

pleasant suggestions, his positive approval or kindly protests, had done more to make her first months among the Melroses happy than any other one thing. Norma loved him, and was grateful to him, even when he hurt her. In the matter of a note of acceptance, of a little act of thanks, of a gown or hat, his decision was absolute, and she had never known it mistaken.

Besides this, she saw him everywhere welcome, everywhere courted and admired, and everywhere the same Chris—handsome, self-possessed, irreproachably dressed whether for golf or opera, adequate to the claims of wife, mother, family, or the world. She had heard Acton turn to him for help in little difficulties; she knew that Leslie trusted him with all her affairs, and he was as close as any man could be to an intimacy with Hendrick von Behrens. Quietly, almost indifferently, he would settle his round eyeglasses on their black ribbon, narrow his fine, keen eyes and set his firm jaw, and take up their problems one by one, always courteous, always interested, always helpful.

Then Chris had charm, as visible to all the world as to Norma. He had the charm of race, of intelligence and education, the charm of a man who prides himself upon his Italian and French, upon his knowledge of books and pictures, and his capacity for holding his own in any group, on any subject. He was quite frankly a collector, a connoisseur, a dilettante in a hundred different directions, and he had had leisure all his life to develop and perfect his affectations. In all this new world Norma could not perhaps have discovered a man more rich in just what would impress her ignorance, her newness, to the finer aspects of civilization.

For a few weeks after "Aïda," as other operas and Annie's tea, and the opening social life of the winter softened the first impression, Norma tried to tell herself that she had imagined a little tendency, on Chris's part, too—well, to impress her with his friendliness. She had seen him flirt with other women, and indeed small love affairs of all sorts were constantly current, not only in Annie's, but in Leslie's group. A certain laxity was in the air, and every month had its separation or divorce, to be flung to the gossips for dissection.

Norma was not especially flattered at first, and rather inclined to resent the assurance with which Chris carried his well-known tendency for philandering into his own family, as it were. But as the full days went by, and she encountered in him, wherever they met, the same grave, kindly attention, the same pleasant mouth and curiously baffling eyes, in spite of herself she began to experience a certain breathless and half-flattered and half-frightened pride in his affection.

He never kissed her again, never tried to arrange even the most casual meeting alone with her, and never let escape even a word of more than brotherly friendliness. But in Leslie's drawing-room at tea time, or at some studio tea or Sunday luncheon in a country house, he always quietly joined her, kept, if possible, within the sound of her voice, and never had any plan that would interfere with possible plans of hers. If she was ready to go, he would drive her, perhaps to discourse impersonally upon the quality of the pictures, or the countryside mantled with snow, upon the way. If she wanted a message telephoned, a telegram sent,

even a borrowed book returned, it was "no trouble at all"; Chris would of course attend to it.

At dinner parties he was rarely placed beside her; hers was naturally the younger set. But he found a hundred ways to remind her that he was constantly attentive. Norma would feel her heart jump in her side as he started toward her across a ball-room floor, handsome, perfectly poised, betraying nothing but generous interest in her youthful good times as he took his place beside her.

So Christmas came and went, and the last affairs of the brief season began to be announced: the last dances, the last dinners, the "pre-Lenten functions" as the papers had it. Norma, apologizing, in one of her flying calls on Aunt Kate, for the long intervals between visits, explained that she honestly did not know where the weeks flew!

"And are you happy, Baby?" her aunt asked, holding her close, and looking anxiously into her eyes.

"Oh—happy!" the girl exclaimed, with a sort of shallow, quick laugh that was quite new. "Of course I am. I never in my life dreamed that I could be so happy. I've nothing left to wish for. Except, of course, that I would like to know where I stand; I would like to have my own position a little more definite," she added. But the last phrases were uttered only in her own soul, and Mrs. Sheridan, after a rather discontented scrutiny of the face she loved so well, was obliged to change the subject.

CHAPTER XVI

In mid-Lent, when an early rush of almost summery warmth suddenly poured over the city, Chris and Norma met on the way home from church. Norma walked every Sunday morning to the big cathedral, but Chris went only once or twice a year to the fashionable Avenue church a few blocks away. This morning he had joined her as she was quietly leaving the house, and instantly it flashed into her mind that he had deliberately planned to do so, knowing that Miss Slater, who usually accompanied her, was away for a week's vacation.

Their conversation was impersonal and casual, as always, as they walked along the drying sidewalks, in the pleasant early freshness, but as Chris left her he asked her at about what time she would be returning, and Norma was not surprised, when she came out of the cathedral, a little later than the great first tide of the outpouring congregation, to see him waiting for her.

The thought of him had been keeping her heart beating fast, and her mind in confusion, even while she tried to pray. And she had thought that she might leave the church by one of the big side doors, and so at least run a fair risk of missing him. But Norma half feared an act that would define their deepening friendship as dangerous, and half longed for the fifteen minutes of walking and chatting in the sunshine. So

she came straight to him, and with no more than a word of greeting they turned north.

It was an exquisite morning, and the clean, bare stretches of the Avenue were swimming in an almost summerlike mist of opal and blue. Such persons as were visible in the streets at all were newsboys, idle policemen, or black-clad women hurrying to or from church, and when they reached the Park, it was almost deserted. The trees, gently moving in a warm breeze, were delicately etched with the first green of the year; maples and sycamores were dotted with new, golden foliage, and the grass was deep and sweet. A few riders were ambling along the bridle-path, the horses kicking up clods of the damp, soft earth.

Norma and Christopher walked slowly, talking. The girl was hardly conscious of what they said, realizing suddenly, and almost with terror, that just to be here, with Chris, was enough to flood her being with a happiness as new and miraculous as the new and miraculous springtime itself. There was no future and no past to this ecstasy, no Alice, no world; it was enough, in its first bloom, that it existed.

"You've had—what is it?—a whole year of us, Norma," Chris said, "and on the whole, it's been happy, hasn't it?"

"Fourteen months," she corrected him. "Fourteen months, at least, since Aunt Kate and I called on Aunt Marianna. Yes, it's been like a miracle, Chris. I never will understand it. I never will understand why a friendless girl—unknown and having absolutely no claim—should have been treated so wonderfully!"

"And you wouldn't want to go back?" he mused, smiling.

"No," she said, quickly. "I am afraid, when I think of ever going back!"

"I don't see why you should," Chris said. "You will inherit, through your grandmother's will——"

He had been following a train of thought, half to himself. Norma's round eyes, as she stopped short in the path, arrested him.

"My *grandmother!*" she exclaimed.

"Your Aunt Marianna," he amended, flushing. But their eyes did not move as they stared at each other.

A thousand remembered trifles flashed through Norma's whirling brain; a thousand little half-stilled suspicions leaped to new life. She had accepted the suggested kinship in childish acquiescence, but doubt was aflame now, once and for all. The man knew that there was no further evading her.

"Chris, do you know anything about me?" she asked, directly.

"Yes, I think—I know everything," he answered, after a second's hesitation.

Norma looked at him steadily. "Did you know my father and mother?" she demanded, presently, in an odd, tense voice.

There was another pause before Chris said, slowly:

"I have met your father. But I knew—I know—your mother."

"You *know* her?" The world was whirling about Norma. "Is Aunt Kate my mother?" she asked, breathing hard.

"No. I don't know why you should not know. You call her Aunt Annie," Chris said.

Norma's hands dropped to her sides. She breathed as if she were suffocating.

"*Aunt Annie!*" she whispered, in stupefaction.

And she turned and walked a few steps blindly, her eyes wide and vacant, and one hand pressed to her cheek. "My God!—my God!" he heard her say.

"Annie eloped when she was a girl," Chris began presently, when she was dazedly walking on again. "She was married, and the man deserted her. She was ill, in Germany—— But shall I talk now? Would you rather not?"

"Oh, no—no! Go on," Norma said, briefly.

"Alice was the first to guess it," Christopher pursued. "Her sister doesn't know it, or dream it!"

"Aunt Annie doesn't! She does not know that I'm her own daughter! . . . But what *does* she think?"

"She supposes that her baby died, dear. I'm sorry to tell you, Norma, but I couldn't lie to you! You'll understand everything, now—why your grandmother wants to make it all up to you——"

"Does Leslie know?" Norma demanded, suddenly, from a dark moment of brooding.

"Nobody knows! Your Aunt Kate, your grandmother, Alice, and I, are absolutely the only people in the world! And Norma, *nobody else must know.* For the sake of the family, for everyone's sake——"

"Oh, I see that!" she answered, quickly and impatiently. And for awhile she walked on in silence, and apparently did not hear his one or two efforts to recommence the conversation. "Aunt Annie!" she said once, half aloud. And later she added, absently: "Yes, I should know!"

They had walked well up into the Park, now they turned back; the sun was getting hot, first perambula-

tors were making their appearance, and Norma loosened her light furs.

"So I am a Melrose!" she mused. And then, abruptly: "Chris, what *is* my name?"

"Melrose," he answered, flushing.

Her eyes asked a sudden, horrified question, and she took the answer from his look without a word. He saw the colour ebb from her face, leaving it very white.

"You said—they—my parents—were married, Chris?" she asked, painfully.

"Annie supposed they were. But he was not free!"

Norma did not speak again. In silence they crossed the Avenue, and went on down the shady side street. Chris, with chosen words and quietly, told her the story of Annie's girlhood, who and what her father had been, the bitter grief of her grandmother, the general hushing up of the whole affair. He watched her anxiously as he talked, for there was a drawn, set look to her face that he did not like.

"Why did Aunt Kate ever decide to bring me to my —my grandmother, after so many years?" she asked.

"I'm sure I don't know that. Alice and I have fancied that Kate might have kept in touch with your father all this time, and that he might be dead now, and not likely to—make trouble."

"That is it," Norma agreed, quickly. "Because not long before she came to see Aunt Marianna she *had* had some sort of news—from Canada, I think. An old friend was dead; I remember it as if it were yesterday."

"Then that fits in," Chris said, glad she could talk.

"But I can't believe it!" she cried in bewilderment. And suddenly she burst out angrily: "Oh, Chris, is it

fair? Is it fair? That one girl, like Leslie, should have so—so much! The name, the inheritance, the husband and position and the friends—and that another, through no fault of hers, should be just—just—a nobody?"

She choked, and Christopher made a little protestant sound.

"Oh, yes, I am!" she insisted, bitterly. "Not recognized by my own mother—she's *not* my mother! No mother could——"

"Listen, dear," Chris begged, really alarmed by the storm he had raised. "Your grandmother, for reasons of her own, never told Annie there was a baby. It is obvious why she kept silent; it was only kindness—decency. Annie was young, younger than you are, and poor old Aunt Marianna only knew that her child was ill, and had been ill-treated, and most cruelly used. You were brought up safely and happily, with good and loving people——"

"The best in the world!" Norma said, through her teeth, fighting tears.

"The best in the world. Why, Norma, what a woman they've made you! You—who stand alone among all the girls I know! And then," Chris continued quickly, seeing her a little quieter, "when you are growing up, your aunt brings you to your grandmother, who immediately turns her whole world topsy-turvy to make you welcome! Is there anything so unfair in that? Annie made a terrible mistake, dear——"

"And everyone but Annie pays!" Norma interrupted, bitterly.

"Norma, she is your mother!" Chris reminded her, in the tone that, coming from him, always instantly

affected her. Her eyes fell, and her tone, when she spoke, was softer.

"Just bearing a child isn't all motherhood," she said.

"No, my dear; I know. And if Annie were ever to guess this, it isn't like her not to face the music, at any cost. But isn't it better as it is, Norma?"

The wonderful tone, the wonderful manner, the kindness and sympathy in his eyes! Norma, with one foot on the lowest step, now raised her eyes to his with a sort of childish penitence.

"Oh, yes, Chris! But"—her lips trembled—"but if Aunt Kate had only kept me from knowing for ever!" she faltered.

"She wouldn't take that responsibility, dear, and one can't blame her. A comfortable inheritance comes from your grandmother; it isn't the enormous fortune Leslie inherited, of course, but it is all you would have had, even had Annie brought you home openly as her daughter. It is enough to make a very pretty wedding-portion for me to give away with you, my dear, in a few years," Chris added more lightly. The suggestion made her face flame again.

"Who would marry me?" she said, under her breath, with a scornful look, under half-lowered lids, into space.

For answer he gave her an odd glance—one that lived in her memory for many and many a day.

"Ah, Norma—Norma—Norma!" he said—quickly, half laughingly. Then his expression changed, and his smile died away. "I have something to bear," he said, with a glance upward toward Alice's windows. "Life isn't roses, roses, all the way for any one of us, my dear! Now, you've got a bad bit of the road

ahead. But let's be good sports, Norma. And come in now, I'm famished; let's have breakfast. My honour is in your hands," he added, more gravely, "perhaps I had no right to tell you all this! You mustn't betray me!"

"Chris," she responded, warmly, "as if I could!"

He watched her eating her breakfast, and chatting with Alice, a little later, and told himself that some of Annie's splendid courage had certainly descended to this gallant little daughter. Norma was pale, and now and then her eyes would meet his with a certain strained look, or she would lose the thread of the conversation for a few seconds, but that was all. Alice noticed nothing, and in a day or two Chris could easily have convinced himself that the conversation in the spring greenness of the Sunday morning had been a dream.

CHAPTER XVII

However, that hour had borne fruit, and in two separate ways had had its distinct effect upon Norma's mind and soul. In the first place, she had a secret now with Chris, and understanding that made her most casual glance at him significant, and gave a double meaning to almost every word they exchanged. It was at his suggestion that she decided to keep the revelation from Alice, even though she knew what Alice knew, for Alice was not very well, and Chris was sure that it would only agitate and frighten the invalid to feel that the family's discreditable secret was just that much nearer betrayal. So she and Chris alone shared the agitation, strain, and bewilderment of the almost overwhelming discovery; and Norma, in turning to him for advice and sympathy, deepened tenfold the tie between them.

But even this result was not so far-reaching as the less-obvious effect of the discovery upon her character. Everything that was romantic, undisciplined, and reckless in Norma was fostered by the thought that so thrilling and so secret a history united her closely to the Melrose family. That she was Leslie's actual cousin, that the closest of all human relationships bound her to the magnificent Mrs. von Behrens, were thoughts that excited in her every dramatic and extravagant tendency to which the amazing year had inclined her. With her growing ease in her changed environ-

ment, and the growing popularity she enjoyed there, came also a sense of predestination, the conviction that her extraordinary history justified her in any act of daring or of unconventionality. There was nothing to be gained by self-control or sanity, Norma might tell herself, at least for those of the Melrose blood.

Her shyness of the season before had vanished, and she could plunge into the summer gaiety with an assurance that amazed even herself. Her first meeting with Annie, after the day of Chris's disclosures, was an ordeal at which he himself chanced to be a secretly thrilled onlooker. Norma grew white, and her lips trembled; there was a strained look in her blue, agonized eyes. But Annie's entire unconsciousness that the situation was at all tense, and the presence of three or four total outsiders, helped Norma to feel that this amazing and dramatic moment was only one more in a life newly amazing and dramatic, and she escaped unnoticed from the trial. The second time was much less trying, and after that Norma showed no sign that she ever thought of the matter at all.

Mrs. von Behrens took Norma to her Maine camp in July, and when the girl joined the Chris Liggetts in August, it was for a season of hard tennis, golf, polo, dancing, yachting, and swimming. Norma grew lean and tanned, and improved so rapidly in manner and appearance that Alice felt, concerning her, certain fears that she one day confided to her mother.

It was on an early September day, dry and airless, and they were on the side porch of the Newport cottage.

"You see how pretty she's growing, Mama," Alice said. And then, in a lower tone, with a quick cautious

glance about: "Mama, doesn't she often remind you of Annie?"

Mrs. Melrose, who had been contentedly rocking and drowsing in the heat, paled with sudden terror and apprehension, and looked around her with sick and uneasy eyes.

"Alice—my darling," she stammered.

"I know, Mama—I'm not going to talk about it, truly!" Alice assured her, quickly. "I never even *think* of it!" she added, earnestly.

"No—no—no, that's right!" her mother agreed, hurriedly. Her soft old face, under the thin, crimped gray hair, was full of distress.

"Mama, there is no reason why it should worry you," Alice said, distressed, too. "Don't think of it; I'm sorry I spoke! But sometimes, even though she is so dark, Norma is so like Annie that it makes my blood run cold. If Annie ever suspected that she is—well, her own daughter——"

Mrs. Melrose's face was ashen, and she looked as if touched by the heat.

"No—no, dear!" she said, with a sort of terrified brevity. "You and Chris were wrong there. I can't talk to you about it, Alice," she broke off, pleadingly; "you mustn't ask me, dear. You said you wouldn't," she pleaded, trembling.

Alice was stupefied. For a full minute she lay in her pillows, staring blankly at her mother.

"*Isn't——!*" she whispered at last, incredulous and bewildered.

"No, dear. Poor Annie——! No, no, no; Norma's mother is dead. But—but you must believe that Mama is acting as she believes to be for the best,"

she interrupted herself, in painful and hesitating tones, "and that I can't talk about it now, Alice; I can't, indeed! Some day——"

"Mama darling," Alice cried, really alarmed by her leaden colour and wild eyes, "please—I'll never speak of it again! Why, I know that everything you do is for us all, darling! Please be happy about it. Come on, we'll talk of something else. When do you leave for town—to-morrow?"

"Poole drives us as far as Great Barrington to-morrow, Norma and me," the old lady began, gaining calm as she reviewed her plans. Chris needed her for a little matter of business, and Norma was anxious to see her Cousin Rose's new baby. The conversation drifted to Leslie's baby, the idolized Patricia who was now some four months old.

CHAPTER XVIII

Two days later found Norma happily seated beside the big bed she and Rose had shared less than two years ago, where Rose now lay, with the snuffling and mouthing baby, rolled deep in flannels, beside her. Rose had come home to her mother, for the great event, and Mrs. Sheridan was exulting in the care of them both. Just now she was in the kitchen, and the two girls were alone together, Norma a little awed and a little ashamed of the emotion that Rose's pale and rapt and radiant face gave her; Rose secretly pitying, from her height, the woman who was not yet a mother.

"And young Mrs. Liggett was terribly disappointed that her baby was a girl," Rose marvelled. "I didn't care one bit! Only Harry is glad it's a boy."

"Well, Leslie was sure that hers was going to be a boy," Norma said, "and I wish you could have heard Aunt Annie deciding that the Melroses usually had sons——"

"She'll have a boy next," Rose suggested.

Norma glanced at her polished finger-tip, adjusted the woolly tan bag she carried.

"She says never again!" she remarked, airily. Rose's clear forehead clouded faintly, and Norma hastened to apologize. "Well, my dear, that's what she *said*," she remarked, laughingly, with quick fingers on Rose's hand.

"It's sad that Mrs. Chris Liggett didn't have just one.

before her accident. It would make such a difference in her life," Rose mused, with her eyes fixed thoughtfully on Norma's face. There was something about Norma to-day that she did not understand.

"Oh, it's frightfully sad," Norma agreed, easily. And because she liked the mere sound of his name, she added: "Chris is fond of children, too!" Then, with a sudden change of manner that even unsuspicious Rose thought odd, she said, gaily: "Isn't Aunt Kate perfectly delicious about the nurse? I knew she would be. Of course, she does everything, and Miss Miller simply looks on."

"Well, almost," Rose said, with an affectionate laugh. "She didn't want a nurse at all, but Harry and Wolf insisted. And then—night before last—when I was so ill, it almost made me laugh in spite of feeling so badly, to hear Mother with Miss Miller. 'You'd better get out of here, my dear,' I heard her say, 'this is no place for a girl like you——'"

Norma's laugh rang out. But Rose noticed that her face sobered immediately almost into sadness, and that there was a bitter line about the lovely mouth, and a shadow of something like cynicism in her blue eyes.

"Norma," she ventured, suddenly storming the fortress, "what is it, darling? Something's worrying you, Nono. Can't you tell me?"

With the old nursery name Norma's gallant look of amusement and reassurance faltered. She looked suddenly down at the hand Rose was holding, and Rose saw the muscles of her throat contract, and that she was pressing her lips together to keep them from trembling.

A tear fell on the locked hands. Norma kept her eyes averted, shook her head.

"Is it a man, Nono?"

Norma looked up, dashed away the tears, and managed a rueful smile.

"Isn't it always a man?" she asked, bravely.

Rose still looked at her anxiously, waiting for further light.

"But, dearest, surely he likes you?"

The other girl was silent, rubbing her thumb slowly to and fro across Rose's thin hand.

"I don't know," she answered, after a pause.

"But of course he does!" Rose said, confidently. "It'll all come right. There's no reason why it shouldn't!" And with all the interest of their old days of intimacy she asked eagerly: "Nono, is he handsome?"

"Oh, yes—tremendously."

"And the right age?"

Norma laughed, half protestant.

"Rose, aren't you a little demon for the third degree!" But she liked it, in spite of the reluctance in her manner, and presently added: "I don't think age matters, do you?"

"Not in the least," Rose agreed. "Norma, does Mrs. Melrose know?"

"Know what?" Norma parried.

"Know that—well, that you like him?"

Norma raised serious eyes, looked unsmilingly into Rose's smiling face.

"Nobody knows. It—it isn't going right, Rose. I can't tell you about all of it——" She paused.

"Well, I wouldn't know the people if you did,"

Rose said, sensibly. And suddenly she added, timidly, "Norma, there isn't another girl?"

"Well, yes, there is, in a way," Norma conceded, after thought.

"That he likes better?" Rose asked, quickly.

"No, I don't think he likes her better!" Norma answered.

"Well, then——?" Rose summarized, triumphantly.

But there was no answering flash from Norma, who was looking down again, and who still wore a troubled expression, although, as Rose rejoiced to see, it was less bitter than it had been.

"Rose," she said, gravely, "if he was already bound in honour; if he was—promised, to her?"

Rose's eyes expressed quick sympathy.

"Norma! You mean engaged? But then how did he ever come to care for you?" she followed it up anxiously.

"I don't know!" Norma said, with a shrug.

"But, Nono, why do you think he *does* like you? Has he said so?"

Norma had freed her hand, and pulled on her rough little cream-coloured gloves. Now she spread her five fingers, and looked at them with slightly raised brows and slightly compressed lips.

"No," she said, briefly and quietly.

Rose's face was full of distress. Again she reached for Norma's fingers.

"Dearest—I'm so sorry! But—but it doesn't make you feel very badly, does it, Norma?"

Norma did not answer.

"Ah, it does!" Rose said, pitifully. "Are you so sure you care?"

At this Norma laughed, glanced for a moment into far space, shook her head. And for a few minutes there was utter silence in the plain little bedroom. Then the baby began to fuss and grope, and to make little sneezing faces in his cocoon of blankets.

"Just one more word, dear," Rose said, later, when Aunt Kate had come flying in, and carried off the new treasure, and when Norma was standing before the mirror adjusting her wide-brimmed summer hat. "If he cares for you, it's much, much better to make the change now, Norma, than to wait until it's too late! No matter how hard, or how unpleasant it is——"

"I know," Norma agreed, quickly, painfully, stooping to kiss her. "We'll be down next month, Rose, and then I'll see you oftener!"

"When do you go?" Rose said, clinging to her hand.

"Go back to Newport? To-morrow. Or at least we get to Great Barrington to-morrow, and we may stay there with the Richies a few days. Aunt Marianna hates to make the trip in one day, so we stayed there last night. But she had to come down to sign some papers. Chris has been down all the week and he wired for her, so she and I drove down together."

"And is the country lovely now?" Rose asked.

"Well—dry. But it is beautiful, too; so hot and leafy and thunderous."

"And where are you—at the old house?"

"No; at a hotel, up near the Park. I wish you and little Peter Pan could get away somewhere, Rose, for we'll have another three weeks of the heat!"

"Oh, my dear, Mother Redding and the baby and I are going to the Berkshires for at least two whole weeks," Rose announced, happily. "And I thought

that my bad boy was coming in early August," she added, of the baby, "or I would have gone first. Try to come oftener, Norma," she pleaded, "for we all love you so!"

And again, Norma's manner worried her. What was there in the sisterly little speech to bring the tears again to Norma's eyes?

"I know you do, Rosy," Norma said, very low. "I wish I could go up to the Berkshires with you."

"Well, then, why don't you, dear?"

"Oh"—Norma flung back her head—"I don't know!" she said, with an attempt at lightness. And two minutes later she had kissed Aunt Kate, and greeted Wolf, in the kitchen, and Rose heard their laughter, and then the closing of the front door.

CHAPTER XIX

Wolf walked with her to the omnibus. He had come in tired with the heat of the long day, but Norma thought him his sweetest self, brotherly, good, unsuspicious, and unaffected. He complimented her on her appearance; he had a kind word for Harry Redding, for the baby; he told Norma that he and his mother had gone to Portland by water a few weeks before and had a great spree. Norma, tired and excited, loved him for his very indifference to her affairs and her mood, for the simplicity with which he showed her the book he was reading, and the amusement he found all along the dry and dusty and dirty street. Everything was interesting to Wolf, and he made no apologies for the general wiltedness and disorder of the neighbourhood.

Norma looked down at him, from the top of the omnibus, and thought that he was a friendly and likable big young man, with his rumpled bare head shining reddish-brown in the streaming, merciless sunlight. She had no idea that his last look at her was like some precious canvas that a collector adds to his treasures, that to the thousands of little-girl Normas, and bookshop Normas, and to the memorable picture of a débutante Norma at her first opera, Wolf carried away with him to-night one more Norma: a brown, self-possessed, prettier-than-ever Norma, in a wide English hat and a plain linen suit, and transparent green silk stockings that matched her green silk parasol.

She got down from the omnibus, a few blocks farther away, and walked slowly along the shady side of the burning cross-streets, thinking, thinking, thinking. It was the hottest hour of the afternoon; there would be a storm to-night, but just now the air hung motionless, and the shadows were almost as dazzling, in their baking dimness, as the sunshine. Houses were closed and silent, show windows bare; the omnibuses creaked by loaded with passengers, trying to get cool. There was an odour of frying potatoes; other odours, stale and lifeless, crept through the stale and lifeless air.

Norma was entirely familiar with this phase of city life, for, except for Sundays at Coney Island, or picnicking on some beach or in some meadow or wood of Connecticut, she and the Sheridans had weathered two successive hot seasons very comfortably within two hundred yards of Broadway. It held no particular horrors for her; she reflected that in another hour or two the sun would quite have died away, and then every flight of old brownstone steps would hold its chatting group, and every street its scores of screaming and running children.

Wherever her thoughts carried her, they began and ended with Christopher. He had never kissed her again after the night of his return from Miami; he had hardly touched even her hand, and he had said no word of love. But, as the summer progressed, these two had grown steadily to live more and more for each other, for just the casual friendly looks and words of ordinary intercourse in the presence of other persons, and for the chance hours that Fate now and then permitted them alone.

Norma, in every other relationship grown more

whimsical and more restless, showing new phases of frivolity and shallowness to the world, had deepened and developed, under Chris's eyes, into her own highest possibility of womanhood. To him she was earnest, honest, only anxious to be good and to be true. He knew the viewpoint of that wiser self that was the real Norma; he knew how wide open those blue eyes were to what was false and worthless in the world around her.

And Norma had seen him change, too, or perhaps more truly become himself. Still apparently the old Chris, handsome, poised, cynical, and only too ready to be bored, he went his usual course of golf and polo, gave his men's dinners, kissed Alice good-bye and departed for yachting or motoring trips. Even Alice, shut away from reality in her own world of music and sweet airs, flowers and friendship, saw no change.

But Norma saw it. She knew that Chris was no longer ready to respond to every pretty woman's idle challenge to a flirtation; she knew that there was a Chris of high ideals, a Chris capable even of heroism, a Chris who loved simplicity, who loved even service, and who was not too spoiled and too proud to give his time as well as his money, to give himself gladly where he saw the need.

Their hours alone together were hours of enchanting discovery. Memories of the little boy that had been Chris, the little girl that had been Norma, their hopes and ambitions and joys and sorrows, all were exchanged. And to them both every word seemed of thrilling and absorbing interest. To Norma life now was a different thing when Chris merely was in the room, however distant from her, however apparently interested in someone, or something, else. She knew that he was

conscious of her, thinking of her, and that presently she would have just the passing word, or smile, or even quiet glance that would buoy her hungry soul like a fresh and powerful current.

It was not strange to her that she should have come to feel him the most vital and most admirable of all the persons about her, for many of the men and women who loved Chris shared this view. Norma had not been in the Melrose house a month before she had heard him called "wonderful", "inimitable", "the only Chris", a hundred times. Even, she told herself sometimes, even the women that Chris quite openly disliked would not return coldness for coldness. And how much less could she, so much younger, resist the generous friendship he offered to her ignorance, and awkwardness, and strangeness?

That he saw in her own companionship something to value she had at first been slow to believe. Sheer pride had driven her to reluctance, to shyness, to unbelief. But that was long ago, months ago. Norma knew now that he truly liked her, that the very freshness and unconventionality of her viewpoint delighted him, and that he gave her a frankness, a simpleness, and an ardour, in his confidences, that would have astonished Alice herself.

Alice! Norma was thinking of Alice, now. Just where did Alice come in? Alice had always been the most generous of wives. But she could not be generous here; no human woman could. She liked Norma, in a sense she needed Norma, but Chris was all her world.

"But, good heavens!" Norma mused, as she walked slowly along, "isn't there to be any friendship for a man but his men friends, or any for a woman except

unmarried men? Isn't there friendship at all between the sexes? Must it always be sneaking and subterfuge, unless it's marriage? I don't want to marry Chris Liggett——"

She stopped short, and the blood left her heart suddenly, and rushed back with a pounding that almost dizzied her.

"*I don't want to marry Chris Liggett*," she whispered, aloud. And then she widened her eyes at space, and walked on blindly for a little way. "Oh, Chris, Chris, Chris!" she said. "Oh, what shall I do?"

An agony almost physical in its violence seized her, and she began to move more rapidly, as if to wear it out, or escape it.

"No, no, no; I can't care for him in that way," said Norma, feeling her throat dry and her head suddenly aching. "We can't—we cannot—like each other that way!"

The rest of the walk was a blank as far as her consciousness was concerned. She was swept far away, on a rushing sea of memories, memories confused and troubled by a vague apprehension of the days to come. That was it; that was it; they loved each other. Not as kinspeople, not as friends, not as the Chris and Norma of Alice's and Leslie's and Annie's lives, but as man and woman, caught at last in the old, old snare that is the strongest in life.

Bewildered and sick, she reached the cool, great colonnaded doorway of the hotel. And here she and Christopher came face to face.

He was coming out, was indeed halfway down the stone steps. They stood still and looked at each other.

Norma thought that he looked tired, that perhaps

the hot week in streets and offices had been hard for him. He was pale, and the smile he gave her was strained and unnatural. They had not seen each other for ten days, and Norma, drinking in every expression of the firm mouth, the shrewd, kindly eyes, the finely set head, felt sudden confidence and happiness flood her being again. It was all nonsense, this imagining of hers, and she and Chris would always be the best friends in the world!

"Alice is perfectly splendid," Norma said, in answer to his first questions, "and Leslie's baby is much less fat and solid looking, and getting to be so cunning. Where is Aunt Marianna?"

"Upstairs," he answered with a slight backward inclination of his head. "We had a most satisfactory day, and you and she can get off to Great Barrington to-morrow without any trouble."

"She and I?" Norma said, distressed by something cold and casual in his manner. "But aren't you coming, too? Alice depends upon your coming!"

"I can't, I'm sorry to say. I may get up on Friday night," Chris said, with an almost weary air of politeness.

"Friday! Why, then—then I'll persuade Aunt Marianna to wait," Norma decided, eagerly. "You must come with us, Chris; it's quite lovely up through Connecticut!"

"I'm very sorry," the man repeated, glancing beyond her as if in a hurry to terminate the conversation. "But I may not get up at all this week. And I've arranged with Aunt Marianna that Poole drives you up to-morrow. You'll find her," he added, lightly, "enthusiastic over the baby's pictures. They're really

excellent, and I think Leslie will be delighted. And now I have to go, Norma——"

"But you're coming back to have dinner with us?" the girl interrupted, thoroughly uneasy at the change in him.

"Not to-night. I have an engagement! Good-bye. I'll see you very soon. The hat's charming, Norma, I think you may safely order more of them by mail if you have to. Good-bye."

And with another odd smile, and his usually courteous bow, he was gone, and Norma was left staring after him in a state almost of stupefaction.

What was the matter with him? The question framed itself indignantly in Norma's mind as she automatically crossed the foyer of the hotel and went upstairs. Mechanically, blindly, she took off the big hat, flung aside the parasol, and went through the uniting bathroom into Mrs. Melrose's room. What on earth had been the matter with Chris? What right had he—how dared he—treat her so rudely?

Mrs. Melrose was in a flowered chair near a wide-opened window. She had put on a lacy robe of thin silk, after the heat and burden of the day, and her feet were in slippers. Beside her was a tall glass, holding an iced drink, and before her, on a small table, Regina had ranged the beautiful photographs of Leslie's baby that were to be the young mother's birthday surprise next week.

"Hello, dear!" she said, in the pleasant, almost cooing voice with which she almost always addressed the girls of the family, "isn't this just a dreadful, dreadful day? Oh, my, so hot! Look here, Norma, just see my little Patricia's pictures. Aren't they

perfectly lovely? I'm *so* pleased with them. I was just—— Regina, will you order Miss Norma something cool to drink, please. Tea, dear? Or lemonade, like your old aunty?—I was just showing them to Chris. Yes. And he thought they were just perfectly lovely; see the little fat hand, and how beautifully the lace took! There—that one's the best. You'll see, Leslie will like that one."

The topic, fortunately for Norma's agitation, was apparently inexhaustible and all-absorbing. The girl could sink almost unnoticed into an opposite chair, and while her voice dutifully uttered sympathetic monosyllables, and her eyes went from the portraits of little Patricia idly about the big room, noting the handsome old maple furniture, and the costly old scrolled velvet carpet, and the aspect of flaming roofs beyond the window in the sunset, her thoughts could turn and twist agonizingly over this new mystery and this new pain. What had been the matter with Chris?

Anger gave way to chill, and chill to utter heartsickness. The cause of the change was unimportant, after all; it was the change itself that was significant. Norma's head ached, her heart was like lead. She had been thinking, all the way down in the car—all to-day—that she would meet him to-night; that they would talk. Now what? Was this endless evening to drag away on his terms, and were they to return to Newport to-morrow, with only the memory of that cool farewell to feed Norma's starving, starving soul?

"Chris couldn't stay and have dinner," Mrs. Melrose presently was regretting, "but, after all, perhaps it's cooler up here than anywhere, and I am so tired that

I'm not going to change! You'll just have to stand me as I am."

And the tired, heat-flushed, wrinkled old face, under its fringe of gray hair, smiled confidently at Norma. The girl smiled affectionately back.

Five o'clock. Six o'clock. It was almost seven when Norma came forth from a cold bath, and supervised the serving of the little meal. She merely played with her own food, and the old lady was hardly more hungry.

"Oh, no, Aunt Marianna! I think that Leslie was just terribly nervous, after Patricia was born. But I think now, especially when they're back in their own house, they'll be perfectly happy.. No reason in the world why they shouldn't be," Norma heard herself saying. So they had been talking of Acton and Leslie, she thought. Leslie was spoiled, and Acton was extravagant, and the united families had been just a little worried about their attitudes toward each other. Mrs. Melrose was sure that Norma was right, and rambled along the same topic for some time. Then Norma realized that they had somehow gotten around to Theodore, Leslie's father. This subject was always good for half hours together, she could safely ramble a little herself. The deadly weight fell upon her spirit again. What had been the matter with Chris?

At nine o'clock her tired old companion began preparations for bed, and Norma, catching up some magazines, went into her own room. She could hear Regina and Mrs. Melrose murmuring together, the running of water, the opening and shutting of bureau drawers.

Norma went to her open window, leaned out into

the warm and brilliant night. There was a hot moon, moving between clouds that promised, at last, a break in the binding heat. Down the Avenue below her omnibuses wheeled and rumbled, omnibuses whose upper seats were packed with thinly clad passengers, but otherwise there was little life and movement abroad. A searchlight fanned the sky, fell and wavered upward again. A hurdy-gurdy, in the side street, poured forth the notes of the "Marseillaise."

Suddenly, and almost without volition, the girl snatched the telephone, and murmured a number. Thought and senses seemed suspended while she waited.

"Is this the Metropolitan Club? Is Mr. Christopher Liggett there? . . . If you will, please. Thank you. Say that it is a lady," said Norma, in a hurried and feverish voice. The operator would announce presently, of course, that Mr. Liggett was not there. The chance that he was there was so remote——

"Chris!" she breathed, all the tension and doubt dropping from her like a garment at the sound of his quiet tones. "Chris—this is Norma!"

A pause. Her soul died within her.

"What is it?" Chris asked presently, in a repressed voice.

"Well—but were you playing cards?"

"No."

"You've had your dinner, Chris?"

"No. Yes, I had dinner, of course. I dined with Aunt Marianna—no, that was lunch! I dined here."

"Chris," Norma faltered, speaking quickly as her courage ebbed, "I didn't want to interrupt you, but you seemed so—so different, this afternoon. And I didn't want to have you cross at me; and I wondered—

I've been wondering ever since—if I have done something that made you angry—that was stupid and—and——"

She stopped. The forbidding silence on his part was like a wall that crossed her path, was like a veil that blinded and choked her.

"Not at all," he said, quickly. "Where did you get that idea? . . . Hello—hello—are you there, Norma?" he added, when on her part in turn there was a blank silence.

For Norma, strangled by an uprising of tears as sudden as it was unexpected and overwhelming, could make no audible answer. Why she should be crying she could not clearly think, but she was bathed in tears, and her heart was heavy with unspeakable desolation.

"Norma!" she heard him say, urgently. "What is it? Norma——?"

"Nothing!" she managed to utter, in a voice that stemmed the flood for only a second.

"Norma," Chris said, simply, "I am coming out. Meet me downstairs in ten minutes. I want to see you!"

Both telephones clicked, and Norma found herself sitting blankly in the sudden silence of the room, her brain filled with a confusion of shamed and doubting and fearful thoughts, and her heart flooded with joy.

Five minutes later she stepped from the elevator into the lobby, and selected a big chair that faced obliquely on the entrance doors. The little stir in the wide, brightly lighted place always interested her and amused her; women drifting from the dining-

room with their light wraps over their arms, messengers coming and going, the far strains of the orchestra mingling pleasantly with the nearer sounds of feet and voices.

To-night her spirit was soaring. Nothing mattered, nothing of her doubts, nothing of his coldness, except that Chris was even now coming toward her! Her mind followed the progress of his motor-car, up through the hot, deserted streets.

Suddenly it seemed to her that she could not bear the emotion of meeting. With every man's figure that came through the wide-open doors her heart thumped and pounded.

His voice; she would hear it again. She would see the gray eyes, and watch the firm, quick movement of his jaw.

Other men, meeting other women, or parting from other women, came and went. Norma liked the big, homely boy in olive drab, who kissed the little homely mother so affectionately.

She glanced at her wrist watch, twisted about to confirm its unwelcome news by the big clock. Quarter to ten, and no Chris. Norma settled down again to waiting and watching.

Ten o'clock. Quarter past ten. He was not coming! No, although her sick and weary spirit rose whenever there was the rush of a motor-car to the curb, or the footstep of a man on the steps outside, she knew now that he was not coming. Hope deferred had exhausted her, but hope dead was far, far worse. He was not coming.

It was almost half-past ten when a bell-boy approached. Was it Miss Sheridan? Mr. Christopher

Liggett had been called out of town, and would try to see Mrs. Melrose in a day or two.

Norma turned upon him a white face of fatigue.

"Is Mr. Liggett on the telephone?"

"No, Miss. He just telephoned a message."

The boy retired, and Norma went slowly upstairs, and slowly made her preparations for sleep. But the blazing summer dawn, smiting the city at four o'clock, found her still sitting at the window, twirling a tassel of the old-fashioned shade in her cold fingers, and staring with haggard eyes into space.

CHAPTER XX

More than a week later Annie gave a luncheon to a dozen women, and telephoned Norma beforehand, with a request that the girl come early enough to help her with name cards.

"These damnable engagement luncheons," said Aunt Annie, limping about the long table, and grumbling at everything as she went. Annie had wrenched her ankle in alighting from her car, and was cross with nagging pain. "Here, put Natalie next to Leslie, Norma; no, that puts the Gunnings together. I'll give you Miss Blanchard—but you don't speak French! Here, give me your pencil—and confound these things anyway—— Fowler," she said to the butler, "I don't like to see a thing like that on the table—carry that away, please; and here, get somebody to help you change this, that won't do! That's all right—only I want this as you had it day before yesterday—and don't use those, get the glass ones——"

And so fussing and changing and criticizing, Annie went away, and Norma followed her up to her bedroom.

"I'm wondering when we're going to give *you* an engagement luncheon, Norma," said the hostess, in a whirl of rapid dressing. "Who's ahead now?"

"Oh—nobody!" Norma answered, with a mirthless laugh. She had been listless and pale for several days, and did not seem herself at all.

"Forrest Duer, is it?"

"Oh, good heavens—Aunt Annie! He's twenty-one!"

"Is that all—he's such a big whale!—— Don't touch my hair, Phoebe, it'll do very well!" said Annie to the maid. "Well, don't be in too much of a hurry, Norma," she went on kindly. "Nothing like being sure! That"—Annie glanced at the retiring maid—"that's what makes me nervous about Leslie," she confessed. "I'm afraid we hurried the child into it just a little bit. It was an understood thing since they were nothing but kiddies."

"Leslie is outrageously spoiled," Norma said, not unkindly.

"Leslie? Oh, horribly. Mama always spoils everyone and poor Theodore spoiled her, too," Annie conceded.

"She told me herself yesterday," Norma went on, with a trace of her old animation, "that they've overdrawn again. Now, Aunt Annie, I do think that's outrageous! Chris straightened them all out last—when was it?—June, after the baby came, and they have an enormous income—thousands every month, and yet they are deep in again!"

"The wretched thing is that they quarrel about that!" Annie agreed.

"Well, exactly! That was what it was about day before yesterday, and Leslie told me she cried all night. And you know the other day she took Patricia and came home to Aunt Marianna, and it was terrible!"

"How much do you suppose the servants know of that?" Annie asked, frowning.

"Oh, they *must* know!" Norma replied.

"Foolish, foolish child! You know, Norma," Annie

resumed, "Leslie comes by her temper naturally. She is half French; her mother was a Frenchwoman—Louison Courtot."

"It's a pretty name," Norma commented. "Did you know her?"

"Know her? She was my maid when I was about seventeen, a very superior girl. I used to practise my French with her. She was extremely pretty. After my father died my mother and I went to Florida, and when we came back the whole thing broke. I thought it would kill Mama! At first we thought Theodore had simply gotten her into 'trouble,' to use the dear old phrase. But *pas du tout;* she had 'ze *mar-ri-age* certificate' all safe and sound. But he was no more in love with her than I was—a boy nineteen! Mama made her leave the house, and cut off Theodore's allowance entirely, and for a while they were together—but it couldn't last. Teddy got his divorce when he went with Mama to California, but he was ill then, though we didn't know it, poor boy! He lived five years after that."

"But he saw Leslie?"

"Oh, dear, yes!" Annie said, buffing her twinkling finger-nails, idly. "Didn't Mama ever tell you about that?"

"No, she never mentions it."

"Well, that was awful, too—for poor Mama. About four years after the divorce, one night when we were all at home—it was just after Mama and I came back from Europe, and the year before Hendrick and I were married—suddenly there was a rush in the hall, and in came Theodore's wife—Louison Courtot! It seems Mama had been in touch with her ever since we

returned, but none of us knew that. And she had Leslie with her, a little thing about four years old—Leslie just faintly remembers it. She had fought Mama off, at first, about giving her baby up, but now she was going to be married, and she had finally consented to do as Mama wanted. Leslie came over to me, and got into my lap, and went to sleep, I remember. Theodore was terribly ill, and I remember that Louison was quite gentle with him—surprised us all, in fact, she was so mild. She had been a wild thing, but always most self-respecting; a prude, in fact. She even stooped over Theodore, and kissed him good-bye, and then she knelt down and kissed Leslie, and went away. Mama had intended that she should always see the child, if she wanted to, but she never came again. She was married, I know, a few weeks later, and long afterward Mama told me that she was dead. Ted came to adore the baby, and of course she's been the greatest comfort to Mama, so it all turns out right, after all. But we're a sweet family!" finished Annie, rising to go downstairs. "And now," she added, on the stairs, "if there were to be serious trouble between Acton and Leslie—— Well, it isn't thinkable!"

Leslie herself, charming in a flowered silky dress, with a wide flowery hat on her yellow hair, was waiting for them in the big, shaded hallway. The little matron was extremely attractive in her new dignities, and her babyish face looked more ridiculously youthful than ever as she talked of "my husband," "my little girl," "my house," and "my attorney."

Leslie, like Annie and Alice, was habitually wrapped in her own affairs, more absorbed in the question of her own minute troubles than in the most widespread

abuses of the world. When Leslie saw a coat, the identity of the wearer interested her far less than the primary considerations of the coat's cut and material, and the secondary decision whether or not she herself would like such a garment. Consequently, she glanced but apathetically at Norma; she had seen the dotted blue swiss before, and the cornflower hat; she had seen Aunt Annie's French organdie; there was nothing there either to envy or admire.

"How's the baby, dear; and how's Acton?" Annie asked, perfunctorily. Leslie sighed.

"Oh, they're both fine," she answered, indifferently. "I've been all upset because my cook got married—just walked out. I told Acton not to pay her, but of course he did; it's nothing to him if my whole house is upset by the selfishness of somebody else. He and Chris are going off this afternoon with Joe and Denny Page, for the Thousand Islands——"

"I didn't know Chris was here!" Annie said, in surprise.

"I didn't, myself. He came up with Acton, late last night. They'd motored all the way; I was asleep when they got in. I didn't know it until I found him at breakfast this morning——"

Norma's heart stood still. The name alone was enough to shake her to the very soul, but the thought that he was here—in Newport—this minute, and that she might not see him, probably indeed would not see him, made her feel almost faint.

She had not seen him since the meeting on the hotel steps nearly two weeks ago. It had been the longest and the saddest two weeks in Norma's life. It was in vain that she reminded herself that her love for him was

weakness and madness, and that by no possible shift of circumstances could it come to happy consummation. It was in vain that she pondered Alice's claims, and all the family claims, and the general claim of society as an institution. Deep and strong and unconquerable above them all rose the tide of love and passion, the gnawing and burning hunger for the sight of him, the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand.

Life had become for her a vague and changing dream, with his name for its only reality. Somewhere in the fog of days was Chris, and she would not live again until she saw him. He must forgive her; he must explain his coldness, explain the change in him, and then she would be content just with the old friendliness, just the old nearness and the occasional word together.

Every letter that Joseph brought her, every call to the telephone, meant to her only the poignant possibility of a message from him. She sickened daily with fresh despair, and fed herself daily with new hopes.

To-day she was scarcely conscious of the hilarious progress of the luncheon; she looked at the prospective bride, in whose honour Aunt Annie entertained, only with a pang of wonder. What was it like, the knowledge that one was openly beloved, the miraculous right to plan an unclouded future together? The mere thought of being free to love Chris, of having him free to claim her, almost dizzied Norma with its vista of utter felicity. She had to drive it resolutely from her mind. Not that—never that! But there must at least be peace and friendship between them.

At three o'clock the luncheon was over; it was half-past three when Leslie and she drove to the Melrose "cottage"—as the fourteen-room, three-story frame

house was called. Norma had searched the drive with her eyes as they approached. The gray roadster was not there. There was no sign of Christopher's hat or coat in the hallway. Alice was alone, in her downstairs sitting-room. Norma s heart sank like a lump of ice.

"Did you see Chris?" the invalid began, happily. "We had the nicest lunch together—just we two. And look at the books the angel brought me—just a feast. You saw him, Leslie, didn't you, dear? He said he caught you and Acton at breakfast. I was perfectly amazed. Miss Slater moved me out here about eleven o'clock, and I heard someone walking in——! He's off now, with the Pages; he told you that, of course!"

"He looks rotten, I think," Leslie offered. "I told him he was working too hard."

"Well, Judge Lee is sick, and he hasn't been in to the office since June," Alice said, "and that makes it very hard for Chris. But he says his room at the club is cool, and now he'll have two or three lovely days with the Page boys——"

Norma, who had subsided quietly into a chair, was looking at the yellow covers of the new French and Italian novels.

"And then does he come back here Monday, for the tennis?" she asked, clearing her throat.

"He says not!" Alice answered, regretfully. "He's going straight on down to the city. Then next week-end is the cruise with the Dwights; and after that, I suppose we'll all be home!"

She went on into a conversation with Leslie, relative to the move. After a few moments Norma went out through the opened French window onto the wide porch.

It was rather a dark, old-fashioned side porch, with an elaborate wooden railing, and potted hydrangeas under a striped awning. The house had neither the magnificence of Annie's gray-stone mansion or the beauty of Leslie's colonial white and green at Glen Cove; it had been built in the late eighties, and was inflexibly ornate.

Norma went down slowly through the garden, and walked vaguely toward the hot glitter and roll of the blue sea. Her misery was almost unbearable. Weeks —it would be weeks before she would see him! He had been here to-day—here in the garden—in Alice's room, and she had not had a word or a sign.

Children and nurses were on the beach, grouped in the warm shade. The season was over, there were yellow leaves in the hedges, Norma's feet rustled among the dropped glory of the old trees. The world seemed hot, dry, lifeless before her.

"I wish I were dead!" she cried, passionately, for the first time in her life.

CHAPTER XXI

SUDDENLY and smoothly they were all transported to town again, and the vigour and sparkle of the autumn was exhilarating to Norma in spite of herself. The Park was a glory of red and gold leaves; morning came late, and the dew shone until ten o'clock; bright mists rose smoking into the sunlight, and when Norma walked home from a luncheon, or from an hour of furious squash or tennis at the club, the early winter dusk would be closing softly in, the mists returning, and the lights of the long Mall in the park blooming round and blue in the twilight.

She was with Mrs. Melrose this winter, an arrangement extremely welcome to the old lady, who was lonely and liked the stir of young life in the house. Alice had quite charmingly and naturally suggested the change, and Norma's belongings had been moved away from the little white room next to Miss Slater's.

One reason for it was that Alice had had two nurses all summer long, and found the increased service a great advantage. Then Mama was all alone and not so well as she had been; getting old, and reluctant to take even the necessary exercise.

"And then you're too young to be shut up with stupid home-loving folk like Chris and me," Alice had told Norma, lightly.

"Your stupidity is proverbial, Aunt Alice," Norma had laughed. She did not care where she went any

more. Chris had greeted her casually, upon their meeting in October, and had studiously, if inconspicuously, ignored her. But even to see him at all was so great a relief to her over-charged heart that for weeks this was enough. She must meet him occasionally, she heard his name every day, and she knew where he was and what he was doing almost at every moment. She treasured every look, every phrase of his, and she glowed and grew beautiful in the conviction that, even though he was still mysteriously angry with her, he had that old consciousness of her presence, too; he might hate her, but he could not ignore her.

And then, in December, the whole matter reached a sudden crisis, and Norma came to feel that she would have been glad to have the matter go back to this state of doubt and indecision again.

Mrs. von Behrens was on the directorate of a working girls' club that needed special funds every winter, and this year the money was to be raised by an immense entertainment, at which generous professional singers were to be alternated on a brilliant programme with society girls and men, in tableaux and choruses. Norma, who had a charming if not particularly strong voice, was early impressed into service, because she was so good-natured, so dependable, and pretty and young enough to carry off a delectable costume. The song she sang had been specially written for the affair, and in the quaint dance that accompanied it she was drilled by the dance authority of the hour. A chorus of eight girls and eight men was added to complete the number, and the gaiety of the rehearsals, and the general excitement and interest, carried the matter along to the last and dress rehearsal with a most encouraging rush.

Annie had originally selected Chris for Norma's companion in the song, for Chris had a pleasant, presentable voice, and Chris in costume was always adequate to any rôle. Theatricals had been his delight, all his life long, and among the flattering things that were commonly said of Chris was that he had robbed the stage of a great character actor.

But Chris had begged off, to take a minor part in another *ensemble*, and Norma had a youth named Roy Gillespie for her partner. Roy was a big, fat, blond boy, good-natured and stupid and rather in love with Norma, and as the girl was entirely unconscious of Annie's original plan, she was quite satisfied with him.

The dress rehearsal was on a dark Thursday afternoon before the Saturday of the performance. It took place in the big empty auditorium, where it was to drag along from twelve o'clock noon, until the preparations for the regular evening performance drove the amateurs, protesting, away. Snow was fluttering down over the city when Annie, with Norma, and a limousine full of properties, reached the place at noon; motor-cars were wheeling and crowding in the side street, and it seemed to Norma thrilling to enter so confidently at the big, dirty, sheet-iron door lettered :

"Stage Door. No Admittance."

As always to the outsider, the wings, the shabby dressing-rooms, the novel feeling of sauntering across the big, dim stage, the gloom of the great rising arch of the house, were full of charm. Voices and hammers were sounding in the gloom; somebody was talking hard while he fitfully played the piano; girls were giggling and fluttering about; footlights flashed up and down, in the front rows of seats a few mothers and

maids had gathered. There was the sweet, strong smell of some spicy disinfectant, and obscure figures, up the aisles, were constantly sweeping and stooping.

Annie had a chair in a wing. Her small fur hat and trim suit had been selected for comfort; her knees were crossed, and she had a sheaf of songs, a pencil, and various note-books in her hands. She was alert, serious, authoritative; her manner expressed an anxious certainty that everything that could possibly go wrong was about to do so. Men protested jovially to Annie, girls whimpered and complained, maids delivered staggering messages into her ear. Annie frowningly yet sympathetically sent them all away, one by one; persisted that the rehearsal proceed. Never mind the hat, we could get along without the hat; never mind Dixie Jadwin, someone could read her part; never mind this, never mind that; go on, go on—we must get on!

At five o'clock she was very tired, and Norma, fully arrayed, was tired, too. The girl had been sitting on barrel for almost an hour, patiently waiting for the tardy Mr. Roy Gillespie to arrive, and permit their particular song to be rehearsed. Everything that could be done in the way of telephoning had been done: Mr. Gillespie had left his office, he was expected momentarily at his home, he should be given the message immediately. Nothing to do but wait.

Suddenly Norma's heart jumped to her throat, began to hammer wildly. A man had come quietly in between her and Annie, and she heard the voice that echoed in her heart all day and all night. It was Chris.

He did not see her, perhaps did not recognize her in a casual glance, and began to talk to his sister-in-law

in low, quick tones. Almost immediately Annie exclaimed in consternation, and called Norma.

"Norma! Chris tells me that poor old Mr. Gillespie died this afternoon. *That's* what's been the matter. What on earth are we to do now? I declare it's *too* much!"

Norma got off her barrel. The great lighted stage seemed to be moving about her as she went to join them.

What Chris saw strained his tried soul to its utmost of endurance. He had not permitted himself to look at her squarely for weeks. Now there was a new look, a look a little sad, a little wistfully expectant, in the lovely face. Her eyes burned deeply blue above the touch of rouge and the crimson lips. Her dark, soft hair fell in loose ringlets on her shoulders from under the absurd little tipped and veiled hat of the late seventies. Her gown, a flowered muslin, moved and tilted with a gentle, shaking majesty over hoop skirts, and was crossed on the low shoulders by a thin silk shawl whose long fringes were tangled in her mitted fingers. The white lace stockings began where the loose lace pantalettes stopped, and disappeared into flat-heeled kid slippers. Norma carried a bright nosegay in lace paper, and on her breast a thin gold locket hung on a velvet ribbon.

She herself had been completely captivated by the costume when Madame Modiste had first suggested it, and when the first fittings began. But that was weeks ago, and she was accustomed to it now, and conscious in this instant of nothing but Chris, conscious of nothing but the possibility that he would have a word or a smile, at last, for her.

"Stay right here, both of you—don't move a step—while I telephone Lucia Street!" said the harassed Annie, her eyes glittering with some desperate hope. She hurried away; they were alone.

"Poor old Roy—he adored his father!" Chris said, with dry lips, and in a rather unnatural voice. Norma, for one second, simulated mere sympathy. Then with a rush the pride and hurt that had sustained her ever since that weary September evening in the hotel lobby vanished, and she came close to Chris, so that the fragrance and sweetness of her enveloped him, and caught his coat with both her mitted hands, and raised her face imploringly, commandingly to his.

"Chris—for God's sake—what have I done? Don't you know—don't you know that you're killing me?"

He looked down at her, wretchedly. And suddenly Norma knew. Not that he liked her, not that she fascinated and interested him, not that they were friends. But that he loved her with every fibre of his being, even as she loved him.

The revelation carried her senses away with it upon a raging sea of emotion and ecstasy. He drew her into a dim corner of the wings, and put his arms about her, and her whole slender body, in its tilting hoops, strained backward under the passion and fury of his first embrace. Again and again his lips met hers, and she heard the incoherent outpouring of murmured words, and felt the storm that shook him as it was shaking her. Norma, after the first kiss, grew limp, let herself rest almost without movement in his arms, shut her eyes.

Reason came back to them slowly; the girl almost rocking upon her feet as the vertigo and bewilderment passed, and the man sustaining her with an arm about

her shoulders, neither looking at the other. So several seconds, perhaps a full minute, went by, while the world settled into place about them; the dingy, unpainted wood of the wings, the near-by stage where absorbed groups of people were still coming and going, the distant gloom of the house.

"So now you know!" Chris said, breathlessly, panting, and looking away from her, with his hands hanging at his sides. "Now you know! I've tried to keep it from you! But now—now you know!"

Norma, also breathing hard, did not answer for a little space.

"I've known since that time we were in town, in September!" she said, almost defiantly. Chris looked toward her, surprised, and their eyes met. "I've known what was the matter with *me*," she added, thoughtfully, even frowning a little in her anxiety to make it all clear, "but I couldn't imagine what it was with *you!*"

But this brought him to face her, so close that she felt the same sense of drowning, of losing her footing, again.

"Chris—please!" she whispered, in terror.

"But, Norma—say it! Say that you love me—that's all that matters now! I've been losing my mind, I think. I've been losing my mind. Just that—that you do care!"

"I have——" Tears came to her lifted blue eyes, and she brushed them away without moving her gaze from him. "I think I have always loved you, Chris—from the very first," she whispered.

Instantly she saw his expression change. It was as if, with that revelation, a new responsibility began for him.

"Here, dear, you mustn't cry!" he said, composedly. He gave her his handkerchief, helped her set the tipped hat and lace veil straight, smiled reassurance and courage into her eyes. "I'll see you, Norma—we'll talk," he said. "Oh, my God, to talk to you again! Come, now, we'll have to be here when Annie comes back—that's right. I—I love the little gown—terribly sweet. I haven't seen it before, you know; my crowd has done all its rehearsing at Mrs. Hitchcock's. Here's Annie now——"

"Christopher," said Annie, in deadly, almost angry earnest, as she came up desperate and weary, "you'll have to sing this thing with Norma. Burgess Street absolutely refuses. He's in the chorus, and he sings, but he simply won't do a solo! His mother says he has a cold, and so on, and I swear I'll throw the whole thing up; I will, indeed!—rather than have this number ruined. There's no earthly reason why you can't do both—of course the poor old man couldn't help dying—but if you knew——"

"My dear girl, of course I'll do it!" All the youth and buoyancy that had been missing from his voice for weeks had come back. Christopher laughed his old delightful laugh. "I'll have to have Roy's costume cut down, but Smithers will do it for me. I'll do my very best——"

"Oh, Chris, God bless you," Annie said. "You'll do it better than he ever did. Take my car and stop for his suit, and express whatever's decent—the funeral will be Saturday morning and we'll all have to go, but there's no help for it. And come to my house for dinner, and you and Norma can go over it afterward; you poor girl, you're tired out, but it's such a Godsend

to have Chris fill in. And it will be the prettiest number of all."

Tired out? The radiant girl who was tripping away to change to street attire was hardly conscious that her feet touched the ground. The stage, the theatre, the fur coat into which she buttoned herself, the fragrance of the violets she wore, were all touched with beauty and enchantment.

Snow was still falling softly, when she and Annie went out to the car. Annie was so exhausted that she could hardly move, but Norma floated above things mortal. The dark sidewalk was powdered with what scrunched under their shoes like dry sugar, and up against the lighted sky the flakes were twirling and falling. The air was sweet and cold and pure after the hot theatre. Chris put them in the motor-car. He would see his tailor, have a bite of dinner at home, and be at Annie's at eight o'clock for the rehearsal.

"I'll do something for you, for this, Norma!" her aunt assured the girl, gratefully. Norma protested in a voice that was almost singing. It was nothing at all!

She felt suddenly happy and light. It was all right; there was to be no more agony and doubt. Alice should lose nothing, the world should know nothing, but Chris loved her! She could take his friendship fearlessly, there would be nothing but what was good and beautiful and true between them. But what a changed world!

What a changed room it was into which she danced, to brush her hair for dinner, and laugh into her mirror, where the happy girl with starry eyes and blazing cheeks laughed back. What a changed dinner table,

at which the old lady drowsed and cooed! Norma's blood was dancing, her head was in a whirl, she was hardly conscious that this soaring and singing soul of hers had a body.

At eight she and Mrs. Melrose went to Mrs. von Behrens's, and Norma and Chris went through the song again and again and again, for the benefit of a small circle of onlookers. Hendrick, who had sworn that wild horses would not drag him to the entertainment, sat with a small son in his lap, and applauded tirelessly. Annie criticized and praised alternately. Mrs. Melrose went to sleep, and Annie's new secretary, a small, lean, dark girl of perhaps twenty-two, passionately played the music. Norma knew exactly how this girl felt, how proud she was of her position, how anxious to hold it, and how infinitely removed from her humble struggle the beautiful Miss Sheridan seemed! Yet she herself had been much the same less than two years ago!

Norma could have laughed aloud. She envied no one to-night. The mystery and miracle of Chris's love for her was like an ermine mantle about her shoulders, and like a diadem upon her brows. Annie was delighted with her, and presently told her she had never before sung so well.

"I suppose practice makes perfect!" the girl answered, innocently. She was conscious of no hypocrisy. No actress enjoying a long-coveted part could have rejoiced in every word and gesture more than she. Just to move, under his eyes, to laugh or to be serious, to listen dutifully to Annie and the old lady, to flirt with Baby Piet, was ecstasy enough.

They had small opportunity for asides. But that

was of no consequence. All the future was their own. They would see each other to-morrow—or next day; it did not matter. Norma's hungry heart had something to remember, now—a very flood-tide of memories. She could have lived for weeks upon this one day's memories.

Norma and Chris were placed toward the centre of the first half of the programme on the triumphant Saturday night, and could escape from the theatre before eleven o'clock to go home to tell Alice all about it. Chris played the song, on his own piano, and Norma modestly and charmingly went through it again, to the invalid's great satisfaction. Alice, when Norma and her mother were gone, tried to strike a spark of enthusiasm from her husband as to the girl's beauty and talent, but Chris was pleasantly unresponsive.

"She got through it very nicely; they all did!" Chris admitted, indifferently.

"When you think of the upbringing she had, Chris, a little nameless nobody," Alice pursued. "When you think that until last year she had actually never seen a finger-bowl, or spoken to a servant!"

"Exactly!" Chris said, briefly. Alice, who was facing the fire, did not see him wince. She was far from suspecting that he had at that moment a luncheon engagement for the next day with Norma, and that during the weeks that followed they met by appointment almost every day, and frequently by chance more often than that.

CHAPTER XXII

In the beginning, these were times brimful of happiness for Norma. She would meet Chris far down town, among the big, cold, snowbound office-buildings, and they would loiter for two hours at some inconspicuous table in a restaurant, and come wandering out into the cold streets still talking, absorbed and content. Or she would rise before him from a chair in one of the foyers of the big hotels, at tea time, and they would find an unobserved corner for the murmur that rose and fell, rose and fell inexhaustibly. Tea and toast unobserved before them, music drifting unheard about them, furred and fragrant women coming and going; all this was but the vague setting for their own thrilling drama of love and confidence. They would come out into the darkness, Norma tucking herself beside him in the roadster, last promises and last arrangements made, until tomorrow.

Sometimes the girl even accompanied him to Alice's room, to sit at the invalid's knee, and chatter with a tact and responsiveness that Alice found an improvement upon her old amusing manner. So free was Norma in these days from any sense of guilt that she felt herself nothing but generous toward Alice, in sparing the older woman some of the excess of joy and companionship in which she was so rich.

But very swiftly the first complete satisfaction in the discovery of their mutual love began to wane, or rather

to be overset with the difficulties by which Norma, and many another more brilliant and older woman, must inevitably be worsted. Her meetings with Chris, innocent and open as they seemed, were immediately threatened by the sordid danger of scandal. To meet him once, twice, half-a-dozen times, even, was safe enough. But when each day of separation became for them both only an agony of waiting until the next day that should unite them, and when all Norma's self-control was not enough to keep her from the telephone summons that at least gave her the sound of his voice, then the world began to be cognizant that something was in the air.

The very maids at Mrs. Melrose's house knew that Miss Sheridan was never available any more, never to be traced to the club, to young Mrs. Liggett's, or to Mrs. von Behrens's house, with a telephone message or an urgent letter. Leslie knew that Norma hated girls' luncheons; Annie asked Hendrick idly why he supposed the child was always taking long walks—or saying that she took long walks—and Hendrick, later speculating himself as to the inaccessibility of Chris, was perhaps the first in the group to suspect the truth.

A quite accidental and innocent hint from Annie overwhelmed Norma with shame and terror, and she and Chris, in earnest consultation, decided that they must be more discreet. But this was slow and difficult work after the radiant first plunge into danger. Despite their utmost resolution, Chris would find her out, Norma would meet him halfway, and even under Leslie's very eyes, or in old Mrs. Melrose's actual presence, the telephone message, or the quicker signals of eyes and smile, would forge the bond afresh.

Even when Norma really did start off heroically upon a bracing winter walk, determined to shake off, in solitude and exercise, the constant hunger for his presence, torturing possibilities would swarm into her mind, and weaken her almost while she thought them banished. She could catch him at his club; she might have just five minutes of him did she choose to telephone.

Perhaps she would resist the temptation, and go home nervous, high-strung, excitable—the evening stretching endlessly before her—without him. Aunt Annie and Hendrick coming, Leslie and Acton coming, the prospect of the decorous family dinner would drive her almost to madness. She would dress in a feverish dream, answer old Mrs. Melrose absently or impatiently, speculating all the time about him. Where was he? When would they meet again?

And then perhaps Leslie would casually remark that Chris had said he would join them for coffee, or Joseph would summon her gravely to the telephone. Then Norma began to live again, the effect of the lonely walk and the heroic resolutions swept away, nothing—nothing was in the world but the sound of that reassuring voice, or the prospect of that ring at the bell, and that step in the hall.

So matters went on for several weeks, but they were weeks of increasing uneasiness and pain for Norma, and she knew that Chris found them even less endurable than she. The happy hours of confidence and happiness grew fewer and fewer, and as their passion strengthened, and the insuperable obstacles to its natural development impressed them more and more forcibly, miserable and anxious times took their place. Their

love was no sooner acknowledged than both came to realize how mad and hopeless it was, and that no reiteration of its intensity and no argument could ever give them a gleam of hope.

If Norma had drifted cheerfully and recklessly into this situation, she paid for it now, when petty restrictions and conventions stung her like so many bees, and when she could turn nowhere for relief from constant heartache and the sickening monotony of her thoughts. She could not have Chris; she could not give him up. Hours with him were only a degree more bearable than hours without him.

When he spoke hopefully of a possible change, of "something" making their happiness possible, she would turn on him like a little virago. Yet if he despaired, tears would come to Norma's eyes, and she would beg him almost angrily to change his tone, or she would disgrace them both by beginning to cry.

Norma grew thin and fidgety, able to concentrate her mind on nothing, and openly indifferent to the society she had courted so enthusiastically a year ago. It was a part of her suffering that she grew actually to dislike Alice, always so suave and cheerful, always so serenely sure of Chris's devotion. What right had this woman, who had been rich and spoiled and guarded all her life, to hold him away from the woman he loved? Chris had been chained to this couch for years, reading, playing his piano, infinitely solicitous and sympathetic. But was he to spend all his life thus? Was there to be no glorious companionship, no adventure, no deep and satisfying love for Chris, ever in this world? Norma wished no ill to Alice, but she hated a world that could hold Alice's claim legitimate.

"Why should it be so?" she said to Chris one day, bitterly. "Why, when all my life was going so happily, did I have to fall in love with you, I wonder? It could so easily have been somebody else!"

"I don't know!" Chris answered, soberly, flinging away his half-finished cigarette, and folding his arms over his chest, as he stared through a screen of bare trees at the river. It was a March day of warm airs and bursting buds; the roads were running water, and every bank and meadow oozed the thawing streams, but there was no green yet. Chris had come for the girl at three o'clock, just as she was starting out for one of her aimless, unhappy tramps, and had carried her off for a twenty-five-mile run to the quiet corner of the tavern's porch in Tarrytown where they were having tea. "I suppose that's just life. Things go so rottenly, sometimes!"

Norma's eyes watered as she pushed the untasted toast away from her, cupped her chin in her hands, and stared at the river in her turn.

"Chris, if I could go back, I think I'd never speak to you!" she said, wretchedly.

"You mustn't say that," he reproached her. "My darling; surely it's brought you some happiness?"

"I suppose so," Norma conceded, lifelessly, after a silence. "But I can't go on!" she protested, suddenly. "I can't keep this up! I suppose I've done something very wicked, to be punished this way. But, Chris, I loved you from the very first day I ever saw you, in Biretta's Bookstore, I think. I can't sleep," she stammered, piteously, "and I am so afraid all the time!"

"Afraid of what?" the man asked, very low.

She faced him, honestly.

"You know what! Of you—of me. It can't go on. You know that. And yet——" And Norma looked far away, her beautiful weary eyes burning in her white face. "And yet, I can't stop it!" she whispered.

"Oh, Chris, don't let's fool ourselves!" she interrupted his protest impatiently. "Weeks ago, *weeks* ago!—we said that we would see each other less, that it would taper off. We tried. It's no use! If we were in different cities—in different families, even! I tell myself that it will grow less and less," she added presently, as the man watched her in silence, "but oh, my God!—how long the years ahead look!"

And Norma put her head down on the table, pressed her white fingers suddenly against her eyes with a gesture infinitely desolate and despairing, and he knew that she was in tears. Then there was a long silence.

"Look here, Norma," said Chris, suddenly, in a quiet, reasonable tone. "I am thirty-eight. I've had affairs several times in my life, two or three before I married Alice, two or three since. They've never been very serious, never gone very deep. When we were married I was twenty-four. I know women like to pretend that I'm an awful killer when I get going," he interrupted himself to say boyishly, "but there was really never anything of that sort in my life. I liked Alice, I remember my mother talking to me a long time, and telling me how pleased everyone would be if we came to care for each other, and—upon my honour!—I was more surprised than anything else, to think that any one so pretty and sweet would marry me! I don't think there's a woman in the world that I admire more. But, Norma, I've lived her life for ten years. I want my own now! I want my companion—my chum—

my wife. I've played with women since I was seventeen. But I never loved any woman before. Norma, there's no life ahead for me, without you. And there's no place so far—so lonely—so strange—but what it would be heaven for me if you were there, looking at me as you are now, and with this little hand where it belongs! My dear, the city is a blank—the men I meet might just as well be wooden Indians; I can't breathe and I can't eat or sleep. Get better? It gets worse! It can't go on!"

She was crying again. They were almost alone now. A red spring sun was sinking, far down the river, and all the world—the opposite shores, the running waters of the Hudson—was bathed in the exquisite glow. Norma fumbled with her left hand for her little handkerchief, her right hand clinging tight to Chris's hand.

"Now, Norma, I've been thinking," the man said, in a matter-of-fact tone, after a pause. "The first consideration is, that this sort of thing can't go on!"

"No; this can't go on!" she agreed, quickly. "Every day makes it more dangerous, and less satisfying! I never"—her eyes watered again—"I never have a happy second!" she said.

Chris looked at her, looked thoughtfully away.

"The great trouble with the way I feel to you, Norma," he said, quietly, "is that it seems to blot every other earthly consideration from view. I see nothing, I think nothing, I hear nothing—but you!"

"And is that so terrible?" Norma asked, touched, and smiling through tears.

"No, it is so wonderful," he answered, gravely, "that it blinds me. It blinds me to your youth, my dear, your inexperience—your faith in me! It makes me only

remember that I need you—and want you—and that I believe I could make you the happiest woman in the world!"

The faint shadow of a frown crossed her forehead, and she slowly shook her head.

"Not divorce!" she said, lightly, but inflexibly. They had been over this ground before. "No, there's no use in thinking of that! Even if it were not for Aunt Alice, and Aunt Marianna, other things make it impossible. You see that, Chris? Yes, I know!"— she interrupted herself quickly, as Chris protested, "I know what plenty of good people, and the law, and society generally think. But of course it would mean that we could not live here for awhile, anyway! No—that's not thinkable!"

"No, that's not thinkable," he agreed, slowly; "I am bound hand and foot. It isn't only what Alice—as a wife—claims from me. But there are Acton and Leslie; there is hardly a month that my brother doesn't propose some plan that would utterly wreck their affairs if I didn't put my foot down. They're both absolute children in money matters; Judge Lee is getting old—there's no one to take my place. Your Aunt Marianna, too; I've always managed everything for her. No; I'm tied."

His voice fell. For awhile they sat silent, in the lingering, cool spring twilight, while the red glow faded slowly from the river, and from the opposite banks where houses and roofs showed between the bare trees.

"But what can we do, Norma? I've tried—I've tried a thousand times, to see the future, without you. But I simply can't go on living on those terms. There's nothing—nothing—nothing! I go to the piano, and

before I touch a note, the utter blank futility of it comes over me and sickens me! It's the same in the office, and at the club; I seem to be only half alive. If it could be even five years ahead—or ten years ahead—I would wait. But it's never—never. No hope—nothing to live for! Life is simply over—only one doesn't die.'

The girl had never heard quite this note of despair from him before, and her heart sank.

"You are young," he said, after a minute, and in a lighter tone, "and perhaps—some day——"

"No, don't believe that, Chris," Norma said, quietly. And with a gesture full of pain she leaned her elbow on the table, and pressed her hand across her eyes. "There will never be anybody else!" she said. "How could there be? You are the only person—like yourself!—that I have ever known!"

The simplicity of her words, almost their childishness, made Chris's eyes smart. He bit his lips, trying to smile.

"It's too bad, isn't it?" he said, whimsically.

Norma flung back her head, swallowing tears. She gathered gloves and hand-bag, got to her feet. He followed her as she walked across the darkening porch. They went down to the curving sweep of driveway where the car waited, the big lighted eyes of other cars picking it out in the gloom. The saturated ground gave under Norma's feet, the air was soft and full of the odorous promise of blossom and leaf. A great star was trembling in the opal sky, which still palpitated, toward the horizon, with the pale pink and blue of the sunset. Dry branches clicked above their heads, in a sudden soft puff of breeze.

Norma, as she tucked herself in beside Chris, felt emotionally exhausted, felt a sudden desperate need for solitude and silence. The world seemed a lonely and cruel place.

Almost without a word he drove her home, to the old Melrose house, and came in with her to the long, dim drawing-room for a brief good-night. He had not kissed her more than two or three times since the memorable night of the dress rehearsal, but he kissed her to-night, and Norma felt something solemn, something renunciatory, in the kiss.

They had but an unsatisfactory two or three minutes together; Mrs. Melrose might descend upon them at any second, was indeed audible in the hall when Chris said suddenly:

"You are not as brave—as your mother, Norma!"

She met his eyes with something like terror in her own; standing still, a few feet away from him, with her breath coming and going stormily.

"No," she said in a sharp whisper. "Not *that!*"

A moment later she was flying upstairs, her blue eyes still dilated with fright, her face pale, and her senses rocking. Unseeing, unhearing, she reached her own room, paced it distractedly, moving between desk and dressing-table, window and bed, like some bewildered animal. Sometimes she put her two hands over her face, the spread fingers pressed against her forehead. Sometimes she stood perfectly still, arms hanging at her sides, eyes blankly staring ahead. Once she dropped on her knees beside the bed, and buried her burning cheeks against the delicate linen and embroideries.

Regina came in; Norma made a desperate attempt to

control herself. She saw a gown laid on the bed, heard bath water running, faced her own haggard self in the mirror, as she began dressing. But when the maid was gone, and Norma, somewhat pale, but quite self-possessed again, was dressed for dinner, she lifted from its place on her book-shelf a little picture of Chris and herself, taken the summer before, and studied it with sorrowful eyes.

He had been teaching her to ride, and Norma was radiant and sun-browned in her riding-trousers and skirted coat, her cloud of hair loosened, and her smart little hat in one hand. Chris, like all well-built men, was always at his best in sports clothes; the head of his favourite mare looked mildly over his shoulder. Behind the group stretched the exquisite reaches of bridle-path, the great trees heavy with summer foliage and heat.

Norma touched her lips to the glass.

"Chris—Chris—Chris!" she said, half aloud. "I love you so—and I have brought you, of all men, to this! To the point when you would throw it all aside —everything your wonderful and generous life has stood for—for me! God," said Norma, softly, putting the picture down, and covering her face with her hands, "don't let me do anything that will hurt him and shame him; help me! Help us both!"

A few minutes later she went down to dinner, which commenced auspiciously, with the old lady in a gracious and expansive mood, and her guests, old Judge Lee and his wife, and old Doctor and Mrs. Turner, sufficiently intimate, and sufficiently reminiscent, to absolve Norma from any conversational duty. The girl could follow her own line of heroic and resolute thought uninterruptedly.

But with the salad came utter rout again, and Norma's colour, and heart, and breath, began to fluctuate in a renewed agony of hope and fear. It was only Joseph, leaning deferentially over Judge Lee's shoulder, who said softly:

"Mr. Christopher Liggett, Judge. He has telephoned that he would like to see you for a moment after dinner, and will be here at about nine o'clock."

The dinner went on, for Norma, in a daze. At a quarter to nine she went upstairs; she was standing in the dark upper hallway at the window when Chris came, saw him leave his car, and come quickly across the sidewalk under the bare, moving boughs of the old maples. She was trembling with the longing just to speak to him again, just to hear his voice.

She went to her room, rang for Regina, meditating a message of good-night that should include a headache as excuse. But before the maid came she went quickly downstairs, and into his presence, as instinctively as a drowning man might cling to anything that meant air—just the essential air. They could not exchange a word alone, but that was not important. The one necessity was to be together.

Before ten o'clock Norma went back to her room. She undressed, and put on a loose warm robe, and seated herself before the old-fashioned fireplace. When Regina came, she asked the girl to put out all the lights.

Voices floated up from the front hall: the great entrance door closed, the motors wheeled away. The guests were gone—Chris was gone. Norma heard old Mrs. Melrose come upstairs, heard her door shut, then there was silence.

Silence. Eleven struck from Madison Tower; mid-

night struck. Even the streets were quieter now. The squares of moonlight shifted on Norma's floor, went away. The fire died down, the big room was warm, and dim, and very still.

Hugged in her warm wrap, curled into her big chair, the girl sat like some tranced creature, thinking—thinking—thinking.

At first her thoughts were of terror and shame. In what fool's paradise had she been drifting, she asked herself contemptuously, that she and Chris, reasonable, right-thinking man and woman, could be reduced to this fearful and wretched position, could even consider —even name—what their sane senses must shrink from in utter horror! Norma was but twenty-two, but she knew that there was only one end to that road.

So that way was closed, even to the brimming tide that rose up in her when she thought of it, and flooded her whole being with the ecstatic realization of her love for Chris, and of what surrender to him would mean.

That way was closed. She must tell herself over and over. For her own sake, for the sake of Aunt Kate and Aunt Marianna, for Rose even, she must not think of that. Above all, for his sake—for Chris, the fine, good, self-sacrificing Chris of her first friendship, she must be strong.

And Norma, at this point in her circling and confused thoughts, would drop her face in the crook of her bent arm, and the tears would brim over again and again. She was not strong. She could not be strong. And she was afraid.

CHAPTER XXIII

REGINA, coming through the hallway at seven o'clock, was amazed to encounter Miss Sheridan, evidently fresh from a bath, a black hat tipped over her smiling eyes, and her big fur coat belted about her. Norma's vigil had lasted until after two o'clock, but then she had had four hours of restful sleep, for she knew that she had found the way.

She left a message with Regina for Mrs. Melrose; she was going to Mrs. Sheridan's, and would telephone in a day or two. Smiling, she slipped out into the quiet street, where the autumn sunlight was just beginning to strike across the damp pavements, and smilingly she disappeared into the great currents of men and women who were already pouring to and fro along the main thoroughfares.

But she did not go quite as far as her aunt's, after all. For perhaps fifteen minutes she waited on the corner of the block, walking slowly to and fro, watching the house closely.

Then Wolf Sheridan came out, and set off at his usual brisk walk toward the subway. Norma stepped before him, trembling and smiling.

"Nono—for the Lord's sake! Where did you come from?"

He took her suit-case from her as she caught his arm, drew him aside, and looked up at him with her old childish air of coaxing.

"Wolf——! I've been waiting for you. Wolf, I'm in trouble!" She laughed at his concern. "Not real trouble!" she reassured him, quickly. "But—but——"

And suddenly tears came, and she found she could not go on.

"Is it a man?" Wolf asked, looking down at her with everything that was brotherly and kind in his young face.

"Yes," Norma answered, not raising her eyes from the overcoat button that she was pushing in and out of its hold. "Wolf," she added, quickly, "I'm afraid of him, and afraid of myself! You—you told me months ago——" She looked up, suffocating.

"I know what I told you!" Wolf said, clearing his throat.

"And—do you still feel—that way?"

"You know I do, Norma," Wolf said, more concerned for her emotion than his own. "Do you—do you want me to send this—this fellow about his business?"

"Oh, no!" she said, laughing nervously. "I don't want any one to know it; nobody must dream it! I can't marry him, I shall never marry him. But—he won't let me alone. Wolf——" She seemed to herself to be getting no nearer her point, and now she seized her courage in both hands, and looked up at him bravely. "Will you—take care of me?" she faltered. "I mean—I mean as your wife?"

"Do you mean——" Wolf began. Then his expression changed, and his colour rose. "Norma—you don't mean that!"

"Yes, but I do!" she said, exquisite and flushed and laughing, in the sweet early sunlight.

"You mean that you will marry me?" Wolf asked, dazedly.

"To-day!" she answered, fired by his look of awe and amazement and rapture all combined. "I want to be safe," she added, quickly. "I trust you more than any other man I know—I've loved you like a little sister all my life."

"Ah—Norma, you darling—you darling!" he said. "But are you sure?"

"Oh, quite sure!" Norma turned him toward Broadway, her little arm linked wife-fashion in his. "Don't we go along together nicely?" she asked, gaily.

"Norma—my God! If you knew how I love you—how I've longed for you! But I can't believe it; I never will believe it! What made you do it?"

Her face sobered for a second.

"Just needing you, I suppose! Wolf"—her colour rose—"I want you to know who it is; it's Chris."

"Who—the man who annoys you?" Wolf asked in healthy distaste.

"The man I'm afraid of," she answered, honestly.

"But—Lord!" Wolf exclaimed, simply, "he has a wife!"

"I know it!" the girl said, quickly. "But I wanted you to know. I want you to know why I'm running away from them all." Relief rang in her voice as his delighted eyes showed no cloud. "That's all!" she said.

"Norma, I can't—my God!—I can't tell whether I'm awake or dreaming!" Wolf was all joy again. "We'll—wait a minute!—we'll get a taxi; I'll telephone the factory later——" He paused suddenly. "Mother's in East Orange with Rose. Shall we go there first?"

"No; you're to do as I say from now on, Wolf!"

"Ah, you darling!"

"And I say let's be married first, and then go and see Rose."

"Norma——" He stopped in the street, and put his two hands on her shoulders. "I'll be a good husband to you. You'll never be sorry you trusted me. Dearest, it's—well, it's the most wonderful thing that ever happened in my whole life! Here's our taxi—wait a minute; what day is this?"

"Whatever else it is," she said, half-laughing and half-crying, "I know it is my wedding day!"

CHAPTER XXIV

To Rose and her mother, Wolf's and Norma's marriage remained one of the beautiful surprises of life; one of the things that, as sane mortals, they had dared neither to dream nor hope. Life had been full enough for mother and daughter, and sweet enough, that March morning, even without the miracle. The baby had been bathed, in a flood of dancing sunshine, and had had his breakfast out under the budding bare network of the grape arbour. The little house had been put into spotless order while he slept, and Rose had pinned on her winter hat, and gone gaily to market, with exactly one dollar and seventy-five cents in her purse. And she had come back to find her mother standing beside the shabby baby-coach, in the tiny backyard, looking down thoughtfully at the sleeping child, and evidently under the impression that she was peeling the apples, in the yellow bowl that rested on her broad hip. Rose had also studied her son for a few awed seconds, and then, reminding her mother that it was past twelve o'clock, had led the way toward tea-making, and the general heating and toasting and mincing of odds and ends for luncheon. And they had been in the kitchen, talking over the last scraps of this meal, when——

When there had been laughter and voices at the open front doorway, and when Mrs. Sheridan's startled "Wolf!" had been followed by Rose's surprised

"Norma!" Then they had come in, Wolf and Norma, laughing and excited and bubbling with their great news. And in joy and tears, confused interruptions and exclamations, explanations that got nowhere, and a plentiful distribution of kisses, somehow it got itself told. They had been married an hour ago—Norma was Wolf's wife!

The girl was radiant. Never in her life had these three who loved her seen her so beautiful, so enchantingly confident and gay. Rose and her mother had some little trouble, later on, in patching the sequence of events together for the delighted but bewildered Harry, Rose's husband. But there could be no doubt, even to the shrewd eyes of her Aunt Kate, that Norma was ecstatically happy. Her mad kisses for Rose, the laughter with which she described the expedition to bank and jeweller, the license bureau and the church in Jersey City—for in order to have the ceremony performed immediately it had been necessary to be married in New Jersey—her delicious boldness toward the awed and rapturous and almost stupefied Wolf, were all proof that she entertained not even the usual girlish misgivings of the wedding day.

"You see, I've not been all tired out with trousseau and engagement affairs and photographers and milliners and all that," she explained, gaily. "I've only got what's in my bag there, but I've wired Aunt Marianna, and told her to tell them all. And we'll be back on Monday—wait until I ask my husband; Wolftone, dear, shall we be back on Monday?"

She had the baby in her lap; they were all in the dining-room. Rose had been assured that the bride and groom were not hungry; they had had sandwiches some-

where—some time—oh, down near the City Hall in Jersey City. But Rose had made more tea, and more toast, and she had opened her own best plum jam, and they were all eating with the heartiness of children. Presently Norma went to get in Aunt Kate's lap, and asked her if she was glad, and made herself so generally engaging and endearing, with her slender little body clasped in the big motherly arms and her soft face resting against the older, weather-beaten face, that Wolf did not dare to look at her.

They were going to Atlantic City; neither had ever been there, and if this warm weather lasted it would be lovely, even in early spring. It was almost four o'clock when the younger women went upstairs for the freshening touches that Norma declared she needed, and then Wolf and his mother were left alone.

He knelt down beside the big rocker in which she was ensconced with the baby, and she put one arm about him, and kissed the big thick crest of his brown hair.

"You're glad, aren't you, Mother?"

"Glad! I've prayed for it ever since she came to me, years ago," Mrs. Sheridan answered. But after a moment she added, gravely: "She's pure gold, our Norma. They've sickened her, just as I knew they would! But, Wolf, she may swing back for a little while. She's like that; she always has been. She was no more than a baby when she'd be as naughty as she could be, and then so good that I was afraid I was going to lose her. Go gently with her, Wolf; be patient with her, dear. She's going to make a magnificent woman, some day."

"She's a magnificent woman, now," the man said,

simply. "She's too good for me, I know that. She's —you can't think how cunning she is—how wonderful she's been, all day!"

"Go slowly," his mother said again. "She's only a baby, Wolf; she's excited and romantic and generous because she's such a baby! Don't make her sorry that she's given herself to you so—so trusting——"

She hesitated.

"I'll take care of her!" Wolf asserted, a little gruffly.

There was time for no more; they heard her step on the stairs, and she came dancing back with Rose. Her cheeks were burning with excitement; she gave her aunt and cousin quick good-bye kisses, and caught the baby's soft little cheek to her own velvety one. She and Wolf would be back on Sunday night, they promised; as they ran down the path the sun slipped behind a leaden cloud, and all the world darkened suddenly. A brisk whirl of springtime wind shook the rose bushes in Rose's little garden, and there was a cool rushing in the air that promised rain.

But Norma was still carried along on the high tide of supreme emotion, and to Wolf the day was radiant with unearthly sunshine, and perfumed with all the flowers of spring. The girl had flung herself so wholeheartedly into her rôle that it was not enough to bewilder and please Wolf, she must make him utterly happy. Dear old Wolf—always ready to protect her, always good and big and affectionate, and ready to laugh at her silliest jokes, and ready to meet any of her problems sympathetically and generously. Her beauty, her irresistible charm as she hung on his arm and chattered of what they would do when they started housekeeping, almost dizzied him.

She liked everything: their wheeling deep upholstered seats in the train; the seaside hotel, with the sea rolling so near in the soft twilight; the dinner for which they found themselves so hungry. Afterward they climbed laughing into a big chair, and were pushed along between the moving lines of other chairs, far up the long boardwalk. And Norma, with her soft loose glove in Wolf's big hand, leaned back against the curved wicker seat, and looked at the little lighted shops, and listened to the scrape of feet and chatter of tongues and the solemn roll and crash of the waves, and stared up childishly at the arch of stars that looked so far and calm above this petty noise and glare. She was very tired, every muscle in her body ached, but she was content. Wolf was taking care of her and there would be no more lonely vigils and agonies of indecision and pain. She thought of Christopher with a sort of childish quiet triumph; she had solved the whole matter for them both, superbly.

Wolf was a silent man with persons he did not know. But he never was silent with Norma; he always had a thousand things to discuss with her. The lights and the stir on the boardwalk inspired him to all sorts of good-natured criticism and speculation, and they estimated just the expense and waste that went on there day by day.

"Really to have the ocean, Wolf, it would be so much nicer to be even in the wildest place—just rocks and coves. This is like having a lion in your front parlour!"

"Lord, Norma—when I got up this morning, if somebody had told me that I would be married, and down at Atlantic City to-night——!"

"I know; it's like a dream!"

"But you're not sorry, Norma; you're sure that I'm going to make you happy?" the man asked, in sudden anxiety.

"You always *have*, Wolf!" she answered, very simply.

He never really doubted it; it was a part of Wolf's healthy normal nature to believe what was good and loving. He was not exacting, not envious; he had no real understanding of her giddy old desires for wealth and social power. Wolf at twenty-five was working so hard and so interestedly, sleeping so deeply, eating his meals with such appetite, and enjoying his rare idle time so heartily, that he had neither time nor inclination for vagaries. He had always been older than his years, schooled to feel that just good meals and a sure roof above him marked him as one of the fortunate ones of the earth, and of late his work in the big factory had been responsible enough, absorbing enough, and more than gratifying enough to satisfy him with his prospects. He was liked for himself, and he knew it, and he was already known for that strange one-sightedness, that odd little twist of mechanical vision, that sure knowledge of himself and his medium, that is genius. The joy of finding himself, and that the world needed him, had been strong upon Wolf during the last few months, and that Norma had come back to him seemed only a reason for fresh dedication to his work, an augury that life was going to be kind to him.

She was gone when he wakened the next morning, but he knew that the sea had an irresistible fascination for her, and followed her quite as surely as if she had left footprints on the clear and empty sands. He found her with her back propped against a low wooden

bulkhead, her slender ankles crossed before her, her blue eyes fixed far out at sea.

She turned, and looked up at him from under the brim of her hat, and the man's heart turned almost sick with the depth of sudden adoration that shook him; so young, so friendly and simple and trusting was the ready smile, so infinitely endearing the touch of the warm fingers she slipped into his! He sat down beside her, and they dug their heels into the sand, and talked in low tones. The sun shone down on them kindly, and the waves curved and broke, and came rushing and slithering to their feet, and slid churning and foaming noisily under the pier near by. Norma buried her husband's big hand in sand, and sifted sand through her slender fingers; sometimes she looked with her far-away look far out across the gently rocking ocean, and sometimes she brought her blue eyes gravely to his. And the new seriousness in them, the grave and noble sweetness that he read there, made Wolf suddenly feel himself no longer a boy, no longer free, but bound for ever to this exquisite and bewildering child who was a woman, or woman who was a child, sacredly bound to give her the best that there was in him of love and service and protection.

She showed him a new Norma, here on the sunshiny sands, one that he was to know better as the days went by. She had always deferred to his wisdom and his understanding, but she seemed to him mysteriously wise this morning—no longer the old little sister Norma, but a new, sage, keen-eyed woman, toward whom his whole being was flooded with humility and awe and utter, speechless adoration.

At nine o'clock, when nurses and children began to

come down to the shore, they got to their feet, and wandered in to breakfast. And here, to his delight, she was suddenly the old mad-cap Norma again, healthily eager for ham and eggs and hot coffee, interested in everything, and bewitchingly pretty in whatever position she took.

"I wish we had the old 'bus, Nono," Wolf said. He usually spoke of his motor-car by this name. "They've been overhauling her in that Newark place. She was to be ready—by George, she was ready yesterday!"

"We'll go over—I'll come over and meet you next Saturday," his young wife promised, busy with rolls and marmalade, "and you'll take me to lunch, and then we'll get the car, and go and take Rose and the baby for a ride!"

"Norma," the man exclaimed, suddenly struck with a sense of utter felicity, and leaning across the table to stop, for the minute, her moving fingers with the pressure of his own, "you haven't any idea how much I love you —I didn't know myself what it was going to mean! To have you come over to the factory, and to have somebody say that Mrs. Sheridan is there, and to go to lunch—— Dearest, do you realize how wonderful and how—well, how *wonderful* it's going to be? Norma, I can't believe it. I can't believe that this is what love means to everybody. I can't believe that every man who marries his—his——"

"Girl," she supplied, laughing.

"Girl—but I didn't mean girl. I meant his ideal—the loveliest person he ever knew," Wolf said, with a new quickness of tongue that she knew was born of happiness. "I can't believe that just going to Childs' restaurants, or taking the car out on Sunday, or any

other fool thing we do, means to any man what it's going to mean to me! I just—well, I told you that. I just can't believe it!"

Two days later they came home for Sunday supper, and there was much simple joy and laughter in the little city apartment. Aunt Kate of course had fried chicken and coffee ice-cream for her four big children. Harry Junior, awakening, was brought dewy and blinking to the table, where his Aunt Norma kissed the tears from his warm, round little cheeks, and gave him crumbs of sponge cake. Rose and Harry left at ten o'clock for their country home, leaving the precious baby for his grandmother and aunt to bring back the next day, but the other three sat talking and planning until almost midnight, and Kate could feast her eyes to her heart's content upon the picture of Wolf in his father's old leather chair, with Norma perched on the wide arm, one of her own arms about her husband's neck and their fingers locked together.

It was settled that they were to find a little house in East Orange, near Rose, and furnish it from top to bottom, and go to housekeeping immediately. Meanwhile, Norma must see the Melroses, and get her wedding announcements engraved, and order some new calling cards, and do a thousand things. She and Wolf must spend their evenings writing notes—and presents would be arriving——!

She made infinitesimal lists, and put them into her shopping bag, or stuck them in her mirror, but Wolf laughed at them all. And instead of disposing of them, they developed a demoralizing habit of wandering out into Broadway, in their old fashion, after dinner, looking into shop windows, drifting into little theatres, talk-

ing to beggars and taxi-cab men and policemen and strangers generally, mingling with the bubbling young life of the city that overflowed the sidewalks, and surged in and out of candy and drug stores, and sat talking on park benches deep into the soft young summer nights.

Sometimes they went down to the shrill and crowded streets of the lower east side, and philosophized youthfully over what they saw there; and, as the nights grew heavier and warmer, they often took the car, and skimmed out into the heavenly green open spaces of the park, or, on Saturday afternoon, packed their supper, and carried it fifty miles away to the woods or the shore.

CHAPTER XXV

BEFORE she had been married ten days Norma dutifully went to call upon old Mrs. Melrose, being fortunate enough to find Leslie there. The old lady came toward Norma with her soft old wavering footsteps, and gave the girl a warm kiss even with her initial rebuke:

"Well, I don't know whether I am speaking to this bad runaway or not!" she quavered, releasing Norma from her bejewelled and lace-draped embrace, and shaking her fluffed and scanty gray hair.

"Oh, yes, you are, Aunt Marianna," the girl said, confidently, with her happy laugh. Leslie, coming more slowly forward, laughed and kissed her, too.

"But why didn't you tell us, Norma, and have a regular wedding, like mine?" she protested. "I didn't know that you and your cousin were even engaged!"

"We've worked it out that we were engaged for exactly three hours and ten minutes," Norma said, as they all settled down in the magnificent, ugly, comfortable old sitting-room for tea. She could see that both Leslie and her grandmother were far from displeased. As a matter of fact, the old lady was secretly delighted. The girl was most suitably and happily and satisfactorily married; justice had been done her, and she had solved her own problem splendidly.

"But you knew he liked you," Leslie ventured, diverted and curious.

"Oh, well——" Norma's lips puckered mischievously and she looked down.

"Oh, you *were* engaged!" Leslie said, incredulously. "He's handsome, isn't he, Norma?"

"Yes," the wife admitted, as if casually. "He really is—at least I think so. And I think everyone else thinks so. At least, when I compare him to the other men—for instance——"

"Oh, Norma, I'll bet you're crazy about him," Leslie said, derisively.

Norma looked appealingly at the old lady, her eyes dancing with fun.

"Well, of *course* she loves her husband," Mrs. Melrose protested, with a little cushiony pat of her hand for the visitor.

"I don't see that it's 'of course'," Leslie argued, airily, with a little bitterness in her tone. Her grandmother looked at her in quick reproof and anxiety. "The latest," she said, drily, to Norma, "is that my delightful husband is living at his club."

"Now, Leslie, that is very naughty," the old lady said, warmly. "You shouldn't talk so of Acton."

"Well," Leslie countered, with elaborate innocence, turning to Norma, "all I can say is that he walked out one night, and didn't come back until the next! Of course," she added, with a suppressed yawn that poorly concealed her sudden inclination to tears, "of course *I* don't care. Patsy and I are going up to Glen Cove next week—and he can live at his club, for all me!"

"Money?" Norma asked. For Leslie's extravagance was usually the cause of the young Liggetts' domestic strife.

Leslie, who had lighted a cigarette, made an affirmative grimace.

"Now, it's all been settled, and Grandma has straightened it all out," old Mrs. Melrose said, soothingly. "Acton was making out their income tax," she explained, "and some money was mentioned—how was that, dear?—Leslie had sold something—and he hadn't known of it, that was all! Of course he was a little cross, poor boy; he had worked it all out one way, and he had no idea that this extra—sixteen thousand, was it?—had come in at all, and been spent——"

"Most of it for bills!" Leslie interpolated, bitterly. Norma laughed.

"Sixteen thou——! Oh, heavens, my husband's salary is sixty dollars a week!" she confessed, gaily.

"But you have your own money," the old lady reminded her, kindly, "and a very nice thing for a wife, too! I've talked to Judge Lee about it, dear, and it's all arranged. You must let me do this, Norma——"

"I think you're awfully good to me, Aunt Marianna," Norma said, thoughtfully. "I told Wolf about it, and he thinks so, too. But honestly——"

Even with her secret knowledge of her own parentage, Norma was surprised at the fluttered anxiety of the old lady, and Leslie was frankly puzzled.

"No, Norma—no, Norma," Mrs. Melrose said, nervously and imploringly. "I don't want you to discuss that at all—it's *settled*. The check is to be deposited every month, or quarter, or whatever it was——"

"Don't be a fool, Norma, you'll need it, one way or another," Leslie assured her. But in her own heart Leslie wondered at her grandmother's generosity.

"Everybody needs more money. I'll bet you the King of England——"

"Oh, kings!" Norma laughed. "They're the worst of all. I don't know about this one, but they're always appealing for special funds—all of them. And that's one thing that makes Wolf so mad—the fact that all they have to do, for ridiculous extravagances, is clap on a tax."

But Leslie and her grandmother were not interested in the young engineer's economic theories. The old lady followed Norma's spirited summary merely with an uneasy: "You mustn't let your husband get any socialistic ideas, Norma; there's too much of that now!" and Leslie, after a close study of Norma's glowing face, remarked suddenly:

"Norma, I'll bet you a *dollar* you're rouged!"

Before she left, the visitor managed a casual inquiry about Aunt Alice.

Aunt Alice was fine, Leslie answered carelessly, adding immediately that no, Aunt Alice really wasn't extremely well. Doctor Garrett didn't want her to go away this summer, thought that move was an unnecessary waste of energy, since Aunt Alice's house was so cool, and she felt the heat so little. And Chris said that Alice had always really wanted to stay in town, in her own comfortable suite. She liked her second nurse immensely, and Miss Slater was really running the house now, the third nurse coming only at night.

"But Aunt Alice never had a nurse at night," Norma was going to say. But she caught the stricken and apprehensive look on the old lady's face, and substituted generously: "Well, I remember Aunt Alice told me she had one of these wretched times several years ago."

"Yes, indeed she did—frightened us almost to death," Mrs. Melrose agreed, thankfully.

"And how is—how is Chris?" Norma felt proud of the natural tone in which she could ask the question.

"Chris is fine," Leslie answered. She rarely varied the phrase in this relation. "He's hunting in Canada. He had a wire from some man there, and he went off about a week ago. They're going after moose, I believe; Chris didn't expect to get back for a month. Aunt Alice was delighted, because she hates to keep him in town all summer, but Acton told me that he thought Chris was sick—that he and Judge Lee just made him go."

Well, her heart would flutter, she could not stop it or ignore it. Norma found no answer ready, and though she lifted her cup to her lips, to hide her confusion, she could not taste it. The strangeness of Chris's sudden departure was no mystery to her; he had been shocked and stunned by her marriage, and he had run away from the eyes that might have pierced his discomfiture.

Still, her hands were trembling, and she felt oddly shaken and confused. Leslie carried the conversation away to safer fields, and shortly afterward Norma could say her good-byes. Everybody, Leslie said, walking with her to the corner, wanted to know what the bride wanted for a wedding-present. Norma told Wolf, over their candle-lighted supper table, an hour or two later, that he and she would be bankrupted for life returning them.

Yet she loved the excitement of receiving the gifts; naturally enough, loved Rose's ecstasies over the rugs and silver and mahogany that made the little New Jersey house a jewel among its kind. It was what

Norma had unhesitatingly pronounced an "adorable" house, a copy of the true colonial green-and-white, quaint and prim enough to please even Leslie, when Leslie duly came to call. It stood at the end of a tree-shaded street, with the rising woods behind it, and Norma recklessly invested in brick walks and a latticed green fence, hydrangeas in wooden tubs and sunflowers and hollyhocks, until her stretch of side garden looked like a picture by Kate Greenaway.

When it was all done, midsummer was upon them, but she and Wolf thought that there had never been anything so complete and so charming in all the world. The striped awnings that threw clean shadows upon the clipped grass; the tea table under the blue-green leaves of an old apple tree; the glass doors that opened upon orderly, white-wainscoted rooms full of shining dark surfaces and flowered chintzes and gleaming glass bowls of real flowers; the smallness and completeness and prettiness of everything filled them both with utter satisfaction.

Norma played at housekeeping like a little girl in a doll's house. She had a rosy little Finnish maid who enjoyed it all almost as much as she did, and their adventures in hospitality were a constant amusement and delight. On Saturdays, when Rose and Harry and Aunt Kate usually arrived, Wolf could hardly believe that all this ideal beauty and pleasure was his to share.

The girls would pose and photograph the baby tirelessly, laughing as he toppled and protested, and kissing the fat legs that showed between his pink romper and his pink socks. They would pack picnic lunches, rushing to and fro breathlessly with thermos bottles and extra wraps for Miggs, as Harry Junior was usually called.

Once or twice they cleaned the car, with tremendous splashing and spattering, assuming Wolf's old overalls for the operation, and retreating with shrieks into the kitchen whenever the sound of an approaching motor-car penetrated into their quiet road. Mrs. Sheridan characterized them variously as "Wild Indians", "Ay-rabs", and "poor innocents" but her heart was so filled with joy and gratitude for the turn of events that had brought all these miracles about, that no nonsense and no noise seemed to her really extravagant.

It was an exceptionally pleasant community into which the young Sheridans had chanced to move, and they might have had much more neighbourly life than they chose to take. There were about them beginners of all sorts: writers and artists and newspaper men, whose little cars, and little maids, and great ambitions would have formed a strong bond of sympathy in time. But Wolf and Norma saw them only occasionally, when a Sunday supper at the country club or a Saturday-night dance supplied them with a pleasant stimulating sense of being liked and welcomed, or when general greetings on the eight-o'clock train in the morning were mingled with comments on the thunderstorm or the epidemic of nursery chicken-pox.

When Rose and Harry were gone, on Sunday evenings, Wolf and Norma might sit on the side steps of the side porch, looking off across the gradual drop descent of tree-tops and shingled roofs, into a distant world silvering under the summer moon. These were their happiest times, when solitude and quiet spread about them, after the hospitable excitements of the day, and they could talk and dream and plan for the years ahead.

She was an older Norma now, even though marriage

had not touched her with any real responsibility, and even though she was more full of delicious childish absurdities than ever. The first months of their marriage had curiously reversed their relationship, and it was Norma now who gave, and Wolf who humbly and gratefully accepted. It was Norma who poured comfort and beauty and companionship into his life, who smiled at him over his morning fruit, and who waited for him under the old maple at the turn of the road, every night. And as her wonderful and touching generosity enveloped him, and her strange wisdom and new sweetness impressed him more and more, Wolf marvelled and adored her more utterly. He had always loved her as a big brother, had even experienced a definite heartache when she grew up and went away, a lovely and unattainable girl in the place where their old giddy dear little Norma had been.

But now his passion for his young wife was becoming a devouring fire in Wolf's heart; she absorbed him and possessed him like a madness. A dozen times a day he would take from his pocket-book the thin leather case she had given him, holding on one side a photograph of the three heads of Rose, his mother, and the baby, and on the other an enchanting shadow of the loosened soft hair and the serious profile that was Norma.

And as he stood looking at it, with the machinery roaring about him, and the sunlight beating in through steel-barred windows sixty feet high, in all the confusion of shavings and oil-soaked wood, polished sliding shafts streaked with thick blue grease, stifling odours of creosote and oily "wipes", Wolf's eyes would fill with tears and he would shake his head at his own emotion, and try to laugh it away.

After awhile he took another little picture of her, this one taken under a taut parasol in bright sunlight, and fitted it over the opposite faces; and then when he had studied one picture he could turn to the other, and perhaps go back to the first before his eyes were satisfied.

And if during the day some thought brought her suddenly to mind, he would stop short in whatever he was doing, and remember her little timid upglancing look as she hazarded, at breakfast, some question about his work, or remember her enthusiasm, on a country tramp, for the chance meal at some wayside restaurant, and sheer love of her would overwhelm him, and he would find his eyes brimming again.

CHAPTER XXVI

So THE summer fled, and before she fairly realized it Norma saw the leaves colouring behind the little house like a wall of fire, and rustled them with her feet when she tramped with Wolf's big collie into the woods. The air grew clearer and thinner, sunset came too soon, and a delicate beading of dew loitered on the shady side of the house until almost noon.

One October day, when she had been six months a wife, Norma made her first call upon Annie von Behrens. Alice she had seen several times, when she had stopped in, late in the summer mornings, to entertain the invalid with her first adventures in housekeeping, and chat with Miss Slater. But Chris she had quite deliberately avoided. He had written her from Canada a brief and charming note, which she had shown Wolf, and he and Alice had had their share in the general family gift of silver, the crates and bags and boxes of spoons and bowls and teapots that had anticipated every possible table need of the Sheridans for generations to come. But that was all; she had not seen Chris, and did not want to see him.

"The whole thing is rather like a sickness, in my mind," she told Wolf, "and I don't want to see him any more than you would a doctor or a nurse that was associated with illness. I don't know what we—what I was thinking about!"

"But you think he really—loved you—Nono?"

"Well—or he thought he did!"

"And did you like him terribly?"

"I think I thought I did, too. It was—of course it was something we couldn't very well discuss——."

"Well, I'm sorry for him." Wolf had dismissed him easily. On her part, Norma was conscious of no particular emotion when she thought of Chris. The suddenness and violence with which she had broken that association and made its resumption for ever impossible, had carried her safely into a totally different life. Her marriage, her new husband and new home, her new title indeed, made her seem another woman, and if she thought of Chris at all it was to imagine what he would think of these changes, and to fancy what he would say of them, when they met. No purely visionary meeting can hold the element of passion, and so it was a remote and spiritualized Chris of whom Norma came to think, far removed from the actual man of flesh and blood.

Her call upon Annie she made with a mental reserve of cheerful explanation and apology ready for Annie's first reproach. Norma never could quite forget the extraordinary relationship in which she stood to Annie; and, perhaps half consciously, was influenced by the belief that some day the brilliant and wonderful Mrs. von Behrens would come to know of it, too.

But Annie, who happened to be at home, and had other callers, rapidly dashed Norma's vague and romantic anticipations by showing her only the brisk and aloof cordiality with which she held at bay nine tenths of her acquaintance. Annie's old butler showed Norma impassively to the little drawing-room that was tucked in beyond the big one; two or three strangers eyed the

newcomer cautiously, and Annie merely accorded her a perfunctory welcome. They were having tea.

"Well, how do you do? How very nice of you, Norma. Do you know Mrs. Theodore Thayer, and Mrs. Thayer, and Miss Bishop? Katrina, this is—the name is still Sheridan, isn't it, Norma?—this is Mrs. Sheridan, who was with Mama and Leslie last summer. You have lots of sugar and cream, Norma, of course—all youngsters do. And you're near the toast——" And Annie, dismissing her, leaned back in her chair, and dropped her voice to the undertone that Norma had evidently interrupted. "Do go on, Leila," she said, to the older of the three women, "that's quite delicious! I heard something of it, but I knew of course that there was more——"

A highly flavoured little scandal was in process of construction. Norma knew the principals slightly; the divorced woman, and the second husband from whom she had borrowed money to loan the first. She could join in the laughter that broke out presently, while she tried to identify her companions. The younger Mrs. Thayer had been the Miss Katrina Davenport of last month's brilliant wedding. Pictures of her had filled the illustrated weeklies, and all the world knew that she and her husband were preparing to leave for a wonderful home in Hawaii, where the family sugar interests were based. They were to cross the continent, Norma knew, in the Davenport private car, to be elaborately entertained in San Francisco, and to be prominent, naturally, in the island set. Little Miss Bishop had just announced her engagement to Lord Donnyfare, a splendid, big, clumsy, and impecunious young Briton who had made himself very popular with the younger

group this winter. They were to be married in January and her ladyship would shortly afterward be transferred to London society, presented at court, and placed as mistress over the old family acres in Devonshire.

They were both nice girls, pretty, beautifully groomed and dressed, and far from unintelligent as they discussed their plans; how their favourite horses and dogs would be moved, and what instructions had been given the maids who had preceded them to their respective homes. Katrina Thayer was just twenty, Mary Bishop a year younger; Norma knew that the former was perhaps the richest girl in America, and the latter was also an heiress, the society papers having already hinted that among the wedding gifts shortly to be displayed would be an uncle's casual check for one million dollars.

"And of course it'll be charming for Chris, Mary," Annie presently said, "if he's really sent to Saint James's."

Norma felt her throat thicken.

"Chris—to England—as Ambassador?" she said.

"Well, there's just a possibility—no, there's more than that!" Annie told her. "I believe he'll take it, if it is offered. Of course, he's supremely well fitted for it. There's even"—Annie threw out to the company at large, with that air of being specially informed in which she delighted—"there's even very good reason to suppose that influence has been brought to bear by —— But I don't dare go into that. However, we feel that it will be offered. And the one serious drawback is naturally my sister. Alice—poor child! And yet, of us all, Alice is most desperately eager for Chris to take it."

"I should think," Norma said, "that Aunt Alice could almost be moved——?"

"Oh, she would be!" Annie agreed, with her quick, superior definiteness. "That's the very question. Whether the north Atlantic passage, say in May, when it oughtn't to be so hard, would be too much for her. Of course it would tire her and shake her cruelly, no doubt of that. But Hendrick even talks of some sort of balanced bed—on the hammock idea—and Miss Slater would see that everything that was humanly possible was done. I believe it could be managed. Then she would be met by one of those big, comfortable English ambulances, at Southampton, and taken right to her apartment, or hotel, or whatever Chris arranges."

"Not so much harder," Norma ventured, "than the trip to Newport, after all."

"Well, she didn't go to Newport last summer," Annie said, "but she is certainly better now than she was then, and I believe it could be done; I really do. We're not talking a great deal about it, because nothing is settled, but if it becomes definite, I shall certainly advise it."

Norma drank her tea, and listened, and threw in an occasional word. When the other women rose to go, she rose, too, perhaps half-hoping that Annie would hold her for a more intimate word. But Annie quite suavely and indifferently included her in her general farewells, and Norma had cordial good-byes from the two young women, and even a vague invitation from the older Mrs. Thayer to come and see her, when Katrina was gone.

Then she was walking down the Avenue, with her head and heart in a confused whirl of bitterness and disappointment. The three quarters of an hour in Aunt Annie's big, dim, luxurious palace had been like a dose of some insidious poison.

The very atmosphere of richness and service and idleness, the beauty of wide spaces and rich tones, the massed blossoms and dimmed lights, struck sharply upon senses attuned to Aunt Kate's quick voice, Rose's little house with its poverty and utility, and Wolf's frank enjoyment of his late and simple dinner. The conversation, with its pleasant assumption of untold wealth of power and travel and regal luxuriousness, burned its memory across Norma's mind like a corroding acid. They were not contemptible, they were not robbers or brutes or hideous old plutocrats who had grown wealthy upon the wrongs of the poor. No, they were normal pleasant girls whose code it was to be generous to maids and underlings, to speak well of their neighbours, to pay their bills and keep their promises.

"They make me *tired!*" she tried to tell herself, walking briskly, and filling her lungs with the sweet fresh air. It was twilight, and the north-bound tide of traffic was halting and rushing, halting and rushing, up the Avenue; now held motionless at a crossing, now flowing on in mad haste, the lumbering omnibuses passing each other, little hansoms threading the mass, and foot passengers scampering and withdrawing, and risking all sorts of passages between. The distance was luminous and blue, and lights pricked against it as against a scarf of gauze.

Oh, it was sickening—it was sickening—to think that life was so grim and hard for the thousands, and so unnecessarily, so superlatively beautiful for the few! What had Mary Bishop and Katrina ever done, that they should travel in private cars, fling aside furs that had cost as much as many a man's yearly salary, chatter of the plantation near the beach at Hawaii, or of reaching Saint James's for the January Drawing-Room!

Norma stopped to give twenty-five cents to an old Italian organ grinder, and worked him into her theme as she went on. Why *should* he look so grateful for her casual charity, he, seventy years old, Katrina and Mary averaging less than twenty!

She reached Aunt Kate's flat in a thorough temper, angry, headachy, almost feverish after the rich scones and the rich tea, and the even less wholesome talk. The apartment house seemed, as indeed it was, grimy and odorous almost to squalor, and Aunt Kate almost hateful in her cheerfulness and energy. This was Wednesday, and on Wednesday evenings she was always happy, for then Wolf and Norma came to dinner with her. To-night, busily manipulating pans and pots, she told Norma that she had rented the two extra bedrooms of the apartment to three young trained nurses, ideal tenants in every way.

"They'll get their breakfasts here, and—if I'm away—there's no reason why they shouldn't cook themselves a little dinner now and then," said Aunt Kate, in her rich, motherly voice. "They were tickled to death to get the two rooms for twenty dollars, and that makes my own rent only seventeen more. I asked them if that was too much, and they said, no, they'd expected to pay at least ten apiece."

Norma listened, unsympathetic and gloomy. It was all so petty and so poor—trained nurses, and apple pie, and Aunt Kate renting rooms, and Wolf eager to be promoted to factory manager.

She wanted to go back—back to the life in which Annie really noticed her, gave her luncheons, included her. She wanted to count for something with Mary and Katrina and Leslie; she wanted to talk to Chris

about his possible ambassadorship; she wanted them all to agree that Norma's wit and charm more than made up for Norma's lack of fortune. While she brushed her hair, in the room that would shortly accommodate two of the three little nurses, she indulged in an unsatisfying dream in which she went to London with Alice—and that autocratic little Lady Donnyfare.

Lady Donnyfare! She would be "your ladyship!" Nineteen years old, and welcomed to the ancestral mansion as her little ladyship!

Norma set the dinner table for three, with jerks and slams that slightly relieved her boiling heart. She got the napkins from the sideboard drawer, and reached for the hand-painted china sugar bowl that was part of a set that Aunt Kate had won at a fair. She set the blue tile that she had given Aunt Kate on a long-ago Christmas where the brown Rebecca teapot would stand, and cut a square slice of butter from the end of the new pound for the blue glass dish. And all the time her heart was bursting with grief and discontent, and she was beginning to realize for the first time the irrevocable quality of the step she had taken, and just how completely it had shut her off from the life for which she thirsted.

Wolf came in, hungry, dirty, radiantly happy, with a quick kiss for his mother and an embrace for his wife into which her slender figure and cloudy brown head almost disappeared. Lord, he was starving; and Lord, he was dead; and Lord, it was good to get home, said Wolf, his satisfaction with life too great to leave room for any suspicion of his wife's entire sympathy.

She told them, over the meal, of Mary and Katrina, in whom their interest was of a simple and amazed quality that Norma resented, and of Chris's prospect,

which did awaken some comment from Mrs. Sheridan. They were a clever family, she said.

But now Wolf, bursting with long suppression, suddenly took the floor with his own great news. Voorhies, the fifty-year-old manager of the California plant, had been drifting about the Newark factory for several days, and Wolf had talked with him respectfully, as a man of twenty-five, whose income is three thousand a year, may talk to a six-thousand-dollar manager, and to-day Voorhies, and Jim Palmer, the Newark manager, and Paul Stromberg, the vice-president, had taken Wolf to lunch with them, apparently casually, apparently from mere friendliness. But Voorhies had asked him if he had ever seen the West; and Stromberg had said that he understood Sheridan's family consisted merely of a young wife, and Palmer had chanced to drop carelessly the fact that Mr. Voorhies was not going back to California——!

That was all. But it was enough to send Wolf back to his work with his head spinning. California—and a managership of a mine—and six thousand! It must be—it must be—that he had been mentioned for it, that they had him in mind! He wasn't going even to think of it—and Norma mustn't—but Lord, it meant being picked out of the ranks; it meant being handed a commission on a silver platter!

Norma tried not to be cold, tried to rise to the little he asked of her, as audience. And she had the satisfaction of knowing that he noticed nothing amiss in her manner, and of seeing him go off to sleep, when they had made the long trip home, with his head in a whirl of glorious hopes. But Norma, for the first time since her marriage, cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE bitterness stayed with her, and gradually robbed her life of everything that was happy and content. Her little household round, that had been so absorbing and so important, became tedious and stupid. Rose, who was expecting her second confinement, had her husband's mother with her, and in care of the old baby, and making preparations for the new, was busy, and had small time for the old companionship; the evenings were too cold for motoring now, even if Wolf had not been completely buried in engineering journals and papers of all sorts.

Norma did not call on Annie again, but a fretted and outraged sense of Annie's coolness and aloofness, and a somewhat similar impression from Leslie's manner, when they met in Fifth Avenue one day, was always in her mind. They could drop her as easily as they had picked her up, these high-and-mighty Melroses! She consoled herself, for a few days, with spectacular fancies of Annie's consternation should Norma's real identity be suddenly revealed to her, but even that poor solace was taken away from her at last.

It was Aunt Kate's unconscious hand that struck the blow, on a wild afternoon, All Hallow E'en, as it happened, when the older woman made the long trip to see Rose, and came on to Norma with a report that everything was going well, and Miggs more fascinating than ever.

Mrs. Sheridan found Norma at the close of the short afternoon, moping in her unlighted house. She had been to the theatre with Wolf and a young couple from the house next door, last night, and had fallen asleep after an afternoon walk, and felt headachy, prickly with heat and cold, and stupid. Yawning and chilly, she kissed her aunt, and suggested that they move to the kitchen. It was Inga's free night and Norma was cook.

"You'll stay and surprise Wolf, he'd love it," Norma said, as the visitor's approving eyes noted the general order and warmth, the blue-checked towels and blue bowls, the white table and white walls. The little harum-scarum baby of the family was proceeding to get her husband a most satisfactory and delicious little dinner, and Aunt Kate was proud of her.

"Did you make that cake, darling?"

"Indeed I did; she can't make cake!"

"And the ham?"

"Well"—Norma eyed the cut ham fondly—"we did that together, out of the book! And I wish you'd taste it, Aunt Kate, it is perfectly delicious. I give it to Wolf every other night, but I think he'd eat it three times a day and be delighted. And last week we made bread—awfully good, too—not hard like that bread we made last summer. Rolls, we made—cinnamon rolls and plain. Harry and Rose were here. And Thanksgiving I'm going to try mincemeat."

"You're a born cook," Aunt Kate said, paying one of her highest compliments with due gravity. But Norma did not respond with her usual buoyancy. She sighed impatiently, and her face fell into lines of discontent and sadness that did not escape the watching

eyes. Mrs. Sheridan changed the subject to the one of a cousin of Harry Redding, one Mrs. Barry with whose problems Norma was already dismally familiar. Mrs. Barry's husband was sick in a hospital, and she herself had to have an expensive operation, and the smallest of the four children had some trouble hideously like infantile paralysis.

Norma knew that Aunt Kate would have liked to have her offer to take at least one of the small and troublesome children for two or three days, if not to stay with the unfortunate Kitty Barry outright. She knew that there was almost no money, that all the household details of washing and cooking were piling up like a mountain about the ailing woman, but her heart was filled with sudden rebellion and impatience with the whole miserable scheme.

"My goodness, Aunt Kate, if it isn't one thing with those people it's another!" she said, impatiently. "I suppose you were there, and up with that baby all night!"

"Indeed I got some fine sleep," Mrs. Sheridan answered, innocently. "Poor things, they're very brave!"

Norma said nothing, but her expression was not sympathetic. She had been thinking of herself as to be pitied, and this ruthless introduction of the Barry question entirely upset the argument. If Mary Bishop and Katrina Thayer were the standard, then Norma Sheridan's life was too utterly obscure and insignificant to be worth living. But of course if incompetent strugglers like the Barrys were to be brought into the question, then Norma might begin to feel the solid ground melting from beneath her feet.

She did not offer the cake or the ham to Aunt Kate,

as contributions toward the small Barrys' lunch next day, nor did she invite any one of them to visit her. Her aunt, if she noted these omissions, made no comment upon them.

"I declare you are getting to be a real woman, Norma," she said.

"I suppose everyone grows up," Norma assented, cheerlessly.

"Yes, there's a time when a child stops being a baby and you see that it's beginning to be a little girl," Mrs. Sheridan mused; "but it's some time later before you know *what sort* of a little girl it is. And then at—say fifteen or sixteen—you see the change again, the little girl growing into a grown girl—a young lady. And for awhile you sort of lose track of her again, until all of a sudden you say: 'Well, Norma's going to be sociable—and like people!' or: 'Rose is going to be a gentle, shy girl——'"

Norma knew the mildly moralizing tone, and that she was getting a sermon.

"You never knew that I was going to be a good housekeeper!" she asserted, inclined toward contrariety.

"I think you're going through another change now, Baby," her aunt said. "You've become a woman too fast. You don't quite know where you are!"

This was so unexpectedly acute that Norma was inwardly surprised, and a little impressed. She sat down at one end of the clean little kitchen table, and rested her face in her hands, and looked resentfully at the older woman.

"Then you *don't* think I'm a good housekeeper," she said, looking hurt.

"I think you will be whatever you want to be, Norma,

it'll all be in your hands now," Mrs. Sheridan answered, seriously. "You're a woman, now; you're Wolf's wife; you've reached an age when you can choose and decide for yourself. You can be—you always could be—the best child the Lord ever made, or you can fret and brood over what you haven't got."

The shrewd kindly eye seemed looking into Norma's very soul. The girl dropped her hard bright stare, and looked sulky.

"I don't see what *I'm* doing!" she muttered. "I can't help wanting—what other people that are no better than I, have!"

"Yes, but haven't you enough, Norma? Think of women like poor Kitty Barry——"

"Oh, Kitty Barry—Kitty Barry!" Norma burst out, angrily. "It isn't my fault that Kitty Barry has trouble; *I* had nothing to do with it! Look at people like Leslie—what she wastes on one new fur coat would keep the Barrys for a year! Eighty-two hundred dollars she paid for her birthday coat! And that's *nothing!* Katrina Thayer——"

"Norma—Norma—Norma!" her aunt interrupted, reproachfully. "What have you to do with girls like the Thayer girl? Why, there aren't twenty girls in the country as rich as that. That doesn't affect *you*, if there's something you can do for the poor and unfortunate——"

"It *does* affect me! I can't"— Norma dropped her tone, and glanced at her aunt. She knew that she was misbehaving—"I can't help inheriting a love for money," she said, breathing hard. "I know perfectly well who I am—who my mother is," she ended, with a half-defiant and half-fearful sob in her voice.

"How do you mean that you know about your mother, Norma?" Mrs. Sheridan demanded, sharply.

"Well"—Norma had calmed a little, and she was a trifle nervous—"Chris told me; and Aunt Alice knows, too—that Aunt Annie is my mother," she said.

"Chris Liggett told you that?" Mrs. Sheridan asked, with a note of incredulity in her voice.

"Yes. Aunt Alice guessed it almost as soon as I went to live there! And I've known it for over a year," Norma said.

"And who told Chris?"

"Well—Aunt Marianna, I suppose!"

There was silence for a moment.

"Norma," said Mrs. Sheridan, in a quiet, convincing tone that cooled the girl's hot blood instantly, "Chris is entirely wrong; your mother is dead. I've never lied to you, and I give you my word! I don't know where Miss Alice got that idea, but it's like her romantic way of fancying things! No, dear," she went on, sympathetically, as Norma sat silent, half-stunned by painful surprise, "you have no claim on Miss Annie. Both your father and mother are dead, Norma; I knew them both. There was a reason," Mrs. Sheridan added, thoughtfully, "why I felt that Mrs. Melrose might want to be kind to you—want to undo an injustice she did years ago. But I've told myself a thousand times that I did you a cruel wrong when I first let you go among them—you who were always so sensible, and so cheerful, and who would always take things as they came, and make no fuss!"

"Oh, Aunt Kate," Norma stammered, bitterly, her lip trembling, and her voice fighting tears, "you don't have to tell me that in your opinion I've changed for

the worse—I see it in the way you look at me! You've always thought Rose was an angel—too good to live!—and that I was spoiled and lazy and good-for-nothing; you were glad enough to get rid of me, and now I hope you're satisfied! They've told me one thing, and you've told me another—and I guess the truth is that I don't belong to anybody; and I wish I was dead, where my f-f-father and m-m-mother are——!"

And stumbling into incoherence and tears, Norma dropped her head on her arm, and sobbed bitterly. Mrs. Sheridan's face was full of pain, but she did not soften.

"You belong to your husband, Norma!" she said, mildly.

Norma sat up, and wiped her eyes on a little handkerchief that she took from the pocket of her housewifely blue apron. She did not meet her aunt's eye, and still looked angry and hurt.

"Well—who *am* I then? Haven't I got some right to know who my mother and father were?" she demanded.

"That you will never hear from me," Mrs. Sheridan replied, firmly.

"But, Aunt Kate——"

"I gave my solemn promise, Norma, and I've kept my word all these years; I'm not likely to break it now."

"But—won't I *ever* know?"

Mrs. Sheridan shrugged her broad shoulders and frowned slightly.

"That I can't say, my dear," she said, gently. "Some day I may be released from my bond, and then I'll be glad to tell you everything."

"Perhaps Wolf will tell me he's nothing to me, now!" the girl continued, with childish temper.

"Wolf—and all of us—think that there's nobody like you," the older woman said, tenderly. But Norma did not brighten. She went in a businesslike way to the stove, and glanced at the various bowls and saucepans in which dinner was baking and boiling, then sliced some stale bread neatly, put the shaved crusts in a special jar, and began to toast the slices with a charming precision.

"Change your mind and stay with us, Aunt Kate?" she said, lifelessly.

"No, dear, I'm going!" And Aunt Kate really did bundle herself into coat and rubber overshoes and woolly scarf again. "November's coming in with a storm," she predicted, glancing out at the darkness, where the wind was rushing and howling drearily.

Norma did not answer. No mere rushing of clouds and whirl of dry and colourless leaves could match the storm of disappointment that was beginning to rage in her own heart.

Yet she felt a pang of repentance, when cheerful Aunt Kate had tramped off in the dark, to Rose's house, which was five blocks away, and perhaps afterward to the desolate Barrys', and wished that she had put her arms about the big square shoulders, and her cheek against her aunt's cheek, and said that she was sorry to be unreasonable.

Rushing to another extreme of unreason, she decided that she and Wolf must go see Rose to-night—and perhaps the Barrys, too—and cheer and solace them all. And Norma indulged in a little dream of herself nursing and cooking in the Barrys' six little cluttered rooms, and earning golden opinions from all the group. There was money, too; she had not used all of October's allowance,

and to-morrow would find another big check at the bank.

Wolf interrrupted by coming in so tired he could hardly move. He ate his dinner, yawned amiably in the kitchen while she cleared it away, and was so sound asleep at nine o'clock that Norma's bedside light and the rustling of the pages of her book, three feet away from his face, had no more effect upon him than if the three feet had been three hundred.

And then the bitter mood came back to her again; the bored, restless, impatient feeling that her life was a stupid affair. And deep in her heart the sense of hurt and humiliation grew and spread; the thought that she was not of the charmed circle of the Melroses, not secretly and romantically akin to them, she was merely the casual object of the old lady's fantastic sense of obligation. Aunt Kate, who had never said what was untrue—who, Norma and her children firmly believed, could not say what was untrue—had taken away, once and for all, the veil of mystery and romance that had wrapped Norma for three exciting years.

For Leslie, and Katrina, and Mary Bishop, perhaps, travel and the thrill of foreign shores or European courts. But for Wolf Sheridan's wife, this small, orderly, charming house on the edge of the New Jersey woods, and the laundry to think of every Monday, and the two-days' ordering to remember every Saturday, as long as the world went round!

For a few days Norma really suffered in spirit, then the natural healthy current of her life reëstablished itself, and she philosophically determined to make the best of the matter. If she was not Aunt Annie's daughter and Leslie's cousin, she was at least their friend.

They—even unsuspecting of any strange relationship—had always been kind to her. And Aunt Marianna and Aunt Alice had been definitely affectionate, to say nothing of Chris!

So one day, when she happened to be shopping in the winter briskness of the packed and brilliant Avenue, she telephoned Leslie at about the luncheon hour. Leslie when last they met had said that she would confidently expect Norma to run out and lunch with her some day—any day.

"Who is it?" Leslie's voice asked, irritably, when at last the telephone connection was established. "Oh, *Norma!* Oh——? What is it?"

"Just wondering how you all were, and what the family news is," Norma said, with an uncomfortable inclination to falter.

"I don't *hear* you!" Leslie protested, impatiently. The insignificant inquiry did not seem to gain much by repetition, and Norma's cheeks burned in shame when Leslie followed it by a blank little pause. "Oh—everyone's fine. The baby wasn't well, but she's all right now."

Another slight pause, then Norma said:

"She must be adorable—I'd like to see her."

"She's not here now," Leslie answered, quickly.

"I've been shopping," Norma said. "Any chance that you could come down town and lunch with me?"

"No, I really couldn't, to-day!" Leslie answered, lightly and promptly.

A moment later Norma said good-bye. She walked away from the telephone booth with her face burning, and her heart beating quickly with anger and resentment.

"Snob—snob—snob!" she said to herself, furiously, of Leslie. And of herself she presently added honestly, "And I wasn't much better, for I don't really like her any more than she does me!" And she stopped for flowers, and a little box of pastry, and went out to delight her Aunt Kate's heart with an unexpected visit.

But a sting remained, and Norma brooded over the injustice of life, as she went about her little house in the wintry sunlight, and listened to Wolf, and made much of Rose and the new baby girl. By Thanksgiving it seemed to her that she had only dreamed of "Aïda" and of Newport, and that the Norma of the wonderful frocks and the wonderful dreams had been only a dream herself.

CHAPTER XXVIII

And then suddenly she was delighted to have a friendly little note from Alice, asking her to come to luncheon on a certain December Friday, as there was "a tiny bit of business" that she would like to discuss; Chris was away, she would be alone. Norma accepted with no more than ordinary politeness, and showed neither Wolf nor his mother any elation, but she felt a deep satisfaction in the renewed relationship.

On the appointed Friday, at one o'clock, she mounted the familiar steps of the Christopher Liggetts' house, and greeted the butler with a delighted sense of returning to her own. Alice was in the front room, before a wood fire; she greeted Norma with her old smile, and with an outstretched hand, but Norma was shocked to see how drawn and strangely aged the smile was, and how thin the hand!

The room had its old scent of violets, and its old ordered beauty and richness, but Norma was vaguely conscious, for the first time, of some new invalid quality of fussiness, of a pretty and superfluous cluttering that had not been characteristic of Alice's belongings a year ago. Alice, too, wore newly a certain stamp of frailty, her always pure high forehead had a faint transparency and shine that Norma did not remember, and the increasing accumulation of pillows and little bookcases and handsome stands about her suggested that her horizon was closing in, that her world was diminishing to this room, and this room alone.

The strange nurse who smilingly and noiselessly slipped away as Norma came in, was another vaguely disquieting hint of helplessness, but Norma knew better than to make any comment upon her impressions, and merely asked the usual casual questions, as she sat down near the couch.

"How are you, Aunt Alice? But you look splendidly!"

"I'm so *well*," said Alice, emphatically, with a sort of solemn thankfulness, "that I don't know myself! Whether it was saving myself the strain of moving to Newport last summer, or what, I don't know. But I haven't been so well for *years !*"

Norma's heart contracted with sudden pity. Alice had never employed these gallant falsehoods before. She had always been quite obviously happy and busy and even enviable, in her limited sphere. The girl chatted away with her naturally enough while the luncheon table was arranged between them and the fire, but she noticed that two nurses shifted the invalid into an upright position before the meal, and that Alice's face was white with exhaustion as she began to sip her bouillon.

They were alone, an hour later, playing with little boxed ices, when Alice suddenly revealed the object of the meeting. Norma had asked for Chris, who was, it appeared, absent on some matter of business for a few days, and it was in connection with the introduction of his name that Alice spoke.

"Chris—that reminds me! I wanted to speak to you about something, Norma; I've wanted to for months, really. It's not really important, because of course you never would mention it any more than I would, and yet

it's just as well to have this sort of thing straightened out! Chris told me"—said Alice, looking straight at Norma, who had grown a trifle pale, and was watching her fixedly—"Chris told me that some months before you were married, he told you of some—some ridiculous suspicions we had—it seems absurd now!—about Annie."

So that was it! Norma could breathe again.

"Yes—we talked about it one morning walking home from church," she admitted.

"I don't know whether you know now," Alice said, quickly, flushing nervously, "that there wasn't one shred of foundation for that—that crazy suspicion of mine! But I give you my word—and my mother told me!—that it wasn't so. I don't know how I ever came to think of it, or why I thought Mama admitted it. But I've realized," said Alice, nervously, "that it was a terrible injustice to Annie, and as soon as Chris told me that you knew it—and of course he had *no business* to let it get any further!—I wanted to set it straight. Poor Annie; she would be perfectly frantic if she knew how calmly I was saddling her with a—a terrible past!" said Alice, laughing. "But I have always been too sensitive where the people I love are concerned, and I blundered into this—this outrageous——"

"My aunt had told me that it was not so," Norma said, coolly and superbly interrupting the somewhat incoherent story. "If I ever really believed it——!" she added, scornfully.

For her heart was hot with rage, and the first impulse was to vent it upon this nearest of the supercilious Melroses. This was all Alice had wanted then, in sending that little overture of friendship: to tell the little nobody

that she was nothing to the great family, after all, to prevent her from ever boasting even an illicit relationship! It was for a formal snub, a definite casting-off, that Norma had been brought all the way from the little green-and-white house in New Jersey! Her eyes grew very bright, and her lips very firm, as she and Alice finished the topic, and she told herself that she would never, never enter the house of Liggett again!

Alice, this load off her mind, and the family honour secure, became much more friendly, and she and Norma were talking animatedly when Leslie and Annie came unexpectedly in. They had been to a débutante luncheon, and were going to a débutante tea, and meanwhile wanted a few minutes with dear Alice, and the latest news of Mrs. Melrose, who was in Florida.

Aunt and niece were magnificently furred and jewelled, magnificently unaware of the existence of little Mrs. Sheridan of East Orange. Norma knew in a second that the social ripples had closed over her head; she was of no further possible significance in the life of either. Leslie was pretty, bored, ill-tempered; Annie her usual stunning and radiantly satisfied self. The conversation speedily left Norma stranded, the chatter of engagements, of scandals, of new names, was all strange to her, and she sat through some ten minutes of it uncomfortably, longing to go, and not quite knowing how to start. She said to herself that she was done with the Melroses; never—never—never again would even their most fervently extended favour win from her so much as a civil acknowledgment!

There was a step in the hall, and a voice that drove the blood from Norma's face, and made her heart begin the old frantic fluttering and thumping. Before she

could attempt to collect her thoughts, the door opened, and Chris came in. He came straight to Alice, and kissed her, holding her hand as he greeted Annie and Leslie. Then he came across the hearthrug, and Norma got to her feet, and felt that his hand was as cold as hers, and that the room was rocking about her.

"Hello, Norma!" he said, quietly. "I didn't expect to find you here!"

"You haven't seen her since she was married, Chris," Alice said, and Chris agreed with a pleasant "That's so!"

He sat down, and Norma, incapable of any effort, at least until she could control the emotion that was shaking her like a vertigo, sank back into her own chair, unseeing and unhearing. The gold clock on the mantel ticked and tocked, the other three women chatted and laughed, and Chris contributed his share to the general conversation. But Norma's one desperate need was for escape.

He made no protest when she said hasty farewells, but when she had gone rapidly and almost blindly down the stairway, and was at the front door, she found him beside her. He got into his fur-collared coat, picked up his hat, and they descended to the sidewalk together, in the colourless, airless, sunless light of the winter afternoon.

"Get in my car!" Chris said, indicating the roadster at the curb.

The girl without a word obeyed. His voice, the motion of his clean-cut mouth, the searching glance of his quick, keen eyes, acted upon her like a charm. Alice—Wolf—everything else in the world vanished from her thoughts, or rather had never been there. She was

drinking again the forbidden waters for which she had thirsted, perhaps without quite knowing it, so long. The strangeness, the strain, the artifice of the last eight months fell from her like a spell; she was herself again, comfortable again, poised again, thrilling from head to heels with delicious and bubbling life—ready for anything!

Now that they were alone she felt no more nervousness; he would speak to her when he was ready, he could not leave her without speaking. Norma settled back comfortably in the deep, low seat, and glanced sidewise at the stern profile that showed between his high fur collar and the fur cap he had pulled well down over his ears. The world seemed changed to her; she had wakened from a long dream.

"No—not the old house!" she presently broke the silence to tell him. "I go to New Jersey."

He had been driving slowly out Fifth Avenue, now he obediently turned, and threaded his way through the cross-street traffic until they were within perhaps a hundred feet of the entrance to the New Jersey subways. Then he ran the car close to the curb, and stopped, and for the first time looked fully at Norma, and she saw his old, pleasant smile.

"Well, and how goes it?" he asked. "How is Wolf? Tell me where you are living, and all about it!"

Norma in answer gave him a report upon her own affairs, and spoke of Aunt Kate and Rose and Rose's children. She did not realize that a tone almost pleading, almost apologetic, crept into her eager voice while she spoke, and told its own story. Chris watched her closely, his eyes never leaving her face. All around them moved the confusion and congestion of Sixth Ave-

nue; overhead the elevated road roared and crashed, but neither man nor woman was more than vaguely conscious of surroundings.

"And are you happy, Norma?" Chris asked.

"Oh, yes!" she answered, quickly.

"You are a very game little liar," he said, dispassionately. "No—no, I'm not blaming you!" he added, hastily, as she would have spoken. "You took the very best way out, and I respect and honour you for it! I was not surprised—although the possibility had never occurred to me."

Something in his cool, almost lifeless tone, chilled her, and she did not speak.

"When I heard of it," Chris said, "I went to Canada. I don't remember the details exactly, but I remember one day sitting up there—in the woods somewhere, and looking at my hunting knife, and looking at my wrist——"

He looked at his wrist now, and her eyes followed his.

"—and if I had thought," Chris presently continued, "that a slash there might have carried me to some region of peace—where there was no hunger for Norma—I would not have hesitated! But one isn't sure —more's the pity!" he finished, smiling with eyes full of pain.

Norma could not speak. The work of long months had been undone in a short hour, and she was conscious of a world that crashed and tumbled in utter ruin about her.

"Well, no use now," Chris said. He folded his arms on his chest, and looked sternly away into space for a minute, and Norma felt his self-control, his repression, as she would have felt no passionate outburst of reproach. "But there is one thing that I've wanted for

a long time to tell you, Norma. If you hadn't been such a little girl, if you had known what life is, you could not have done what you did!"

"I suppose not," she half-whispered, with a dry throat, as he waited for some sign from her.

"No, you couldn't have given yourself to any one else —if you had known," Chris went on, as if musing aloud. "And that brings me to what I want to say. Marriage lasts a long, long time, Norma, and even you—with all your courage!—may find that you've promised more than you can perform! The time may come——

"Norma, I hope it won't!" he interrupted himself to say, bitterly. "I try to hope it won't! I try to hope that you will come to love him, my dear, and forget me! But if that time does come, what I want you to remember is this afternoon, and sitting here with me in the car, and Chris telling you that whenever—or wherever—or however he can serve you, you are to remember that he is living just for that hour! There will never be any change in me, Norma, never anything but longing and longing just for the sight of you, just for one word from you! I love you, my dear—I can't help it. God knows I've *tried* to help it. I love you as I don't believe any other woman in the world was ever loved! So much that I want life to be good to you, even if I never see you, and I want you to be happy, even without me!"

He had squared about to face her, and as the passionate rush of words swept about her, Norma laid her little gloved hand gently upon his big one, and her blue eyes, drowned in sudden tears, fixed themselves in exquisite desolation and despair upon his face.

Once or twice she had whispered "I know—I know!"

as if to herself, but she did not interrupt him, and when he paused he saw that she was choked with tears, and could not speak.

"The mad and wonderful sacrifice you made I can't talk about, Norma," he said. "Only an ignorant, noble-hearted little girl like you could have done that! But that's all over, now. You must try to make your life what they think it is—those good people that love you! And I'll try, too!—I do try. And you mustn't cry, my little sweetheart," Chris added, with a tenderness so new, and so poignantly sweet, that Norma was almost faint with the sheer joy of it, "you mustn't blame me for just saying this, this once, because it's for the last time! We mustn't meet——" His voice dropped. "I think we mustn't meet," he repeated, painfully and slowly.

"No!" she agreed, quickly.

"But you are to remember that," Chris reiterated, "that I am living, and moving about, and going to the office, and back to my home, only because you are alive in the world, and the day may come when I can serve you! Life has been only that to me, for a long, long time!"

For a long minute Norma sat silent, her dark lashes fallen on her cheek, her eyes on the hand that she had grasped in her own.

"I'll remember, Chris! Thank you, Chris!" she said, simply. Then she raised her eyes and looked straight at him, with a childish little frown, puzzled and bewildered, on her forehead, and they exchanged a long look of good-bye. Chris raised her hand to his lips, and Norma very quietly slipped from her seat, and turned once to smile bravely at him before she was lost in the

swiftly moving whirlpool of the subway entrance. She was trembling as she seated herself in the train, and moved upon her way scarcely conscious of what she was doing.

But Chris did not move from his seat for more than an hour.

Norma went home, and quickly and deftly began her preparations for dinner. Inga had been married a few weeks before, and so Norma had no maid. She put her new hat into its tissue paper, and tied a fresh checked apron over her filmy best waist, and stepped to and fro between stove and dining table, as efficient a little housekeeper as all New Jersey could show.

Wolf came home hungry and good-natured, and kissed her, and sat at the end of her little kitchen table while she put the last touches to the meal, appreciative and amusing, a new magazine for her in the pocket of his overcoat, an invitation from his mother for dinner to-morrow night, and a pleasant suggestion that he and she wander up Broadway again and look in windows, after his mother's dinner.

They talked, while they dined, of the possibility of the California move, and Wolf afterward went down to the furnace. When the fire was banked for the night, he watched the last of the dinner clearance, and they went across the cold dark strip of land between their house and a neighbour's, to play three exciting rubbers of bridge.

And at eleven Wolf was asleep, and Norma reading again, or trying to read. But her blood was racing, and her head was spinning, and before she slept she brought out all her memories of the afternoon. Chris's words rang in her heart again, and the glances that had accom-

panied them unrolled before her eyes like some long pageant that was infinitely wonderful and thrilling. Leslie and Annie and Alice might snub her, but Chris—their idol, the cleverest and most charming man in all their circle!—Chris loved her. Chris loved her. And—from those old dreamy days in Biretta's Bookstore, had she not loved Chris?

Another morning came, another night, and life went its usual way. But Norma was wrapped in a dream that was truly a pillar of cloud by day, and of flame by night. She was hardly aware of the people about her, except that her inner consciousness of happiness and of elation gave her an even added sweetness and charm, made her readier to please them, and more anxious for their love.

Wolf almost immediately saw the change, but she did not see the shadow that came to be habitual in his young face, nor read aright his grave eyes. She supposed him perhaps unusually busy, if indeed she thought of him at all. Like her aunt, and Rose, and the rest of her world, he was no more now than a kindly and dependable shadow, something to be quickly put aside for the reality of her absorbing friendship for Chris.

CHAPTER XXIX

DESPITE their resolve not to see each other in the two weeks that followed Alice's luncheon, Norma had seen Chris three times. He had written her on the third day, and she had met the postman at the corner, sure that the big square envelope would be there. They had had luncheon, far down town, and walked up through the snowy streets together, parting with an engagement for the fourth day ahead, a matinée and tea engagement. The third meeting had been for luncheon again, and after lunch they had wandered through an Avenue gallery, looking at the pictures, and talking about themselves.

Chris had loaned her books, little slim books of dramas or essays, and Chris had talked to her of plays and music. One night, when Wolf was in Philadelphia, Chris took her to the opera again, duly returning her to Aunt Kate at half-past eleven, and politely disclaiming Aunt Kate's gratitude for his goodness to little Norma.

He never attempted to touch her, to kiss her; he never permitted himself an affectionate term, or a hint of the passion that enveloped him; they were friends, that was all, and surely, surely, they told themselves, a self-respecting man and woman may be friends—may talk and walk and lunch together, and harm no one? Norma knew that it was the one vital element in Chris's life, as in her own, and that the hours that he did not spend

with her were filled with plans and anticipations for their times together.

One evening, just before Christmas, when the young Sheridans were staying through a heavy storm with their mother, Wolf came home with the news that he must spend some weeks in Philadelphia, studying a new method of refining iron ore. It was tacitly understood that this transfer was but a preliminary to the long-anticipated promotion to the California managership, but Wolf took it very quietly, with none of the exultation that the compliment once would have caused him.

"I'll go with you to Philadelphia," Norma said, not quite naturally. She had been made vaguely uneasy by his repressed manner, and by the fact that her kiss of greeting had been almost put aside by him, at the door, a few minutes earlier. Dear old Wolf; she had always loved him—she would not have him unhappy for all the world!

In answer he looked at her unsmilingly, wearily narrowing his eyes as if to concentrate his thoughts.

"You can't, very well, but thank you just the same, Norma," he said, formally. "I shall be with Voorhies and Palmer and Bender all the time; they put me up at a club, and there'll be plenty of evening work—nearly every evening——"

"Norma'll stay here with me!" Aunt Kate said, hospitably.

"Well"— Wolf agreed, indifferently—"I can run up from Philadelphia and be home every Saturday, Mother," he added. Norma felt vaguely alarmed by his manner, and devoted her best efforts to amusing and interesting him for the rest of the meal. After

dinner she came in from the kitchen to find him in a big chair in the little front parlour, and she seated herself upon an arm of it, and put her own arm loosely about his neck.

"What are you reading, Wolf? Shall we go out and burn up Broadway? There's a wonderful picture at The Favourite."

He tossed his paper aside, and moved from under her, so that Norma found herself ensconced in the chair, and her husband facing her from the rug that was before the little gas log.

"Where's Mother?"

"Gone downstairs to see how the Noon baby is."

"Norma," said Wolf, without preamble, "did you see Chris Liggett to-day?"

Her colour flamed high, but her eyes did not waver.

"Yes. We met at Sherry's. We had lunch together."

"You didn't meet by accident?" There was desperate hope in Wolf's voice. But Norma would not lie. With her simple negative her head drooped, and she looked at her locked fingers in silence.

Wolf was silent, too, for a long minute. Then he cleared his throat, and spoke quietly and sensibly.

"I've been a long time waking up, Nono," he said. "I'm sorry! Of course I knew that there was a difference; I knew that you—felt differently. And I guessed that it was Chris. Norma, do you—do you still like him?"

She looked up wretchedly, nodding her head.

"More"— he began, and stopped—"more than you do me?" he asked. And in the silence he added suddenly: "Norma, I thought we were so happy!"

Then the tears came.

"Wolf, I'll never love any one more than I do you!" the girl said, passionately. "You've always been an angel to me—always the best friend I ever had. I know you—I know what you are to Rose, Aunt Kate, and what the men at the factory think of you. I'm not fit to tie your shoes! I'm wicked, and selfish, and—and everything I oughtn't to be! But I can't help it. I've wanted you to know—all there was to know. I've met him, and we've talked and walked together; that's all. And that's all we want—just to be friends. I'm sorry——" Her voice trailed off on a sob. "I'm awfully sorry!" she said.

"Yes," Wolf said, slowly, after a pause, "I'm sorry, too!"

He sat down, rumpling his hair, frowning. Norma, watching him fearfully, noticed that he was very pale.

"I thought we were so happy," he said again, simply.

"Ah, Wolf, don't think I've been fooling all this summer!" his wife pleaded, her eyes filling afresh. "I've loved it all—the peach ice-cream, and the picnics, and everything. But—but people can't help this sort of thing, can they? It does happen, and—and they just simply have to make the best of it, don't they? If—if we go to California next month—you know that I'll do everything I can——!"

He was not listening to her.

"Norma," he interrupted, sharply, "if Liggett's wife was out of the way—would you want to marry him?"

"Wolf!—what's the use of asking that? You only—you only excite us both. Aunt Alice *isn't* out of the way, and even if she were, I am your wife. I'm sorry.

I'll never meet him again—I haven't been a bit happy about it. I'll promise you that I will not see him again."

"I don't ask you for that promise," Wolf said. "I don't know what we can do! I never should have let you—I shouldn't have been such a fool as to—but somehow, I'd always dreamed that you and I would marry. Well!"—he interrupted his musing with resolute cheerfulness—"I've got to get over to the library to-night," he said, "for I may have to start for Phily to-morrow afternoon. Will you tell Mother——"

Norma immediately protested that she was going with him, but he patiently declined, kissing her in a matter-of-fact sort of way as he pulled on the old overcoat and the new gloves, and slamming the hall door behind him when he went.

For a minute she stood looking after him, with a great heartache almost blinding her. Then she flashed to her room, and before Wolf had reached the corner his wife had slipped her hand into his arm, and her little double step was keeping pace with his long stride in the way they both loved.

She talked to him in her usual manner, and presently he could answer normally, and they bought peppermints to soften their literary labours. In the big library Wolf was instantly absorbed, but for awhile Norma sat watching the shabby, interested, intelligent men and women who came and went, the shabby books that crossed the counters, the pretty, efficient desk-clerks under their green droplights. The radiators clanked and hissed softly in the intervals of silence, sometimes there was whispering at the shelves, or one of the attendants spoke in a low tone.

Norma loved the atmosphere, so typical a phase of

the great city's life. After awhile she idly dragged toward her three books, from a table, and idly dipped into them: "The Life of the Grimkés"; "The Life of Elizabeth Prentiss"; "The Letters of Charles Dickens."

Nine struck; ten; eleven. Wolf had some six or seven large books about him, and alternated his plunges into them with animated whispered conversations with a silver-headed old man, two hours ago an utter stranger, but always henceforth to be affectionately quoted by Wolf as a friend.

They indulged in the extravagance of a taxicab for the home trip. Norma left Wolf still reading, after winning from him a kiss and a promise not to "worry", and went to bed and to sleep. When she wakened, after some nine delicious hours, he was gone; gone to Philadelphia, as it proved.

Breakfasting at ten o'clock, in a flood of sweet winter sunshine, she put a brave face on the matter. She told herself that it was better that Wolf should know, and only the part of true kindness not to deny what, for good or ill, was true. The memory of his grave and troubled face distressed her, but she reminded herself that he would be back on Saturday, and then he would have forgiven her. She would see Chris to-day, to-morrow, and the day after, and by that time they would have said everything that there was to say, and they would never see each other again.

For it was a favourite hallucination of theirs that every meeting was to be the last. Not, said Chris, that there was any harm in it, but it was wiser not to see each other. And when Norma, glowing under his eyes, would echo this feeling, he praised her for her courage as if they had resisted the temptation already.

"I've thought it all over, Chris," she would say, "and I know that the wisest way is to stop. And you must help me." And when Chris answered, "Norma, I don't see where you get that marvellous courage of yours," it did not occur to Norma to question in what way she was showing courage at all. She lived upon his praise, and could not have enough of it. He never tired of telling her that she was beautiful, good, brave, a constant inspiration, and far above the ordinary type of woman; and Norma believed him.

On the day before Wolf's first week-end return from Philadelphia, Chris was very grave. When he and Norma were halfway through their luncheon, in the quiet angle of an old-fashioned restaurant, he told her why. Alice was failing. Specialists had told him that England was out of the question. She might live a year, but the probability was against it. They —he and Norma—Chris said, must consider this, now.

Norma considered it with a paling face. It—it couldn't make any difference, she said, quickly and nervously.

And then, for the first time, he talked to her of her responsibility in the matter, of what their love meant to them both. Wolf had his claim, true; but what was truly the generous thing for a woman to do toward a a man she did not love? Wasn't a year or two of hurt feelings, even anger and resentment, better than a loveless marriage that might last fifty years?

This was a terrible problem, and Norma did not know what to think. On the one hand was the certainty of that higher life from which she had been exiled since her marriage: the music, the art, the letters, the cultivated voices and fragrant rooms, the wealth

and luxury, the devotion of this remarkable and charming man, whose simple friendship had been beyond her dreams a few years ago. On the other side was the painful and indeed shameful desertion of Wolf, the rupture with Aunt Kate and Rose, and the undying sense in her own soul of an unworthy action.

But Rose was absorbed in Harry and the children, and Aunt Kate would surely go with Wolf to California, three thousand miles away——

"I am not brave enough!" she whispered.

"You *are* brave enough," Chris answered, quickly. "Tell him the truth—as you did on your wedding day. Tell him you acted on a mad impulse, and that you are sorry. A few days' discomfort, and you are free, and one week of happiness will blot out the whole wretched memory for ever."

"It is not wretchedness, Chris," she corrected, with a rueful smile. But she did not contradict him, and before they parted she promised him that she would not go to California without at least telling Wolf how she felt about it.

Rose and Harry joined them for the Saturday night reunion. Norma thought that Wolf seemed moody, and was unresponsive to her generous welcome, and she was conscious of watching him somewhat apprehensively as the evening wore on. But it was Sunday afternoon before the storm broke.

Wolf was at church when Norma wakened, and as she dressed she meditated a trifle uneasily over this departure from their usual comfortable Sunday morning habit. She breakfasted alone, Wolf and his mother coming in for their belated coffee just as Norma, prettily coated and hatted and furred, was leaving

the house for the ten-o'clock Mass. They did not meet again until luncheon, and as Wolf had explained that he must leave at four o'clock for Philadelphia, Norma began to think that this particular visit would end without any definite unpleasantness.

However, at about three o'clock, he invited her to walk with him to the station, and join his mother later, at Rose's house, in New Jersey, and Norma dared not refuse. They locked the apartment, and walked slowly down Broadway, as they had walked so many thousand times before, in the streaming Sunday crowds. Before they had gone a block Wolf opened hostilities by asking abruptly:

"Where did you go to church this morning?"

Norma flushed, and laughed a little.

"I went down to the Cathedral; I'm fond of it, you know. Why?"

"Did you meet Chris Liggett?" Wolf asked.

"Yes—I did, Wolf. He goes to the church near there, now and then."

"When you telephone him to," Wolf said, grimly.

Norma began to feel frightened. She had never heard this tone from Wolf before.

"I did telephone him, as a matter of fact—or rather he happened to telephone me, and I said I was going there. Is there anything so horrifying in that?" she asked.

"Just after you went out, the telephone operator asked me if the Murray Hill number had gotten us," Wolf answered; "that's how I happen to know."

Norma was angry, ashamed, and afraid, all at once. For twenty feet they walked in silence. She stole more than one anxious look at her companion; Wolf's face

was set like flint. He was buttoned into the familiar old overcoat, a tall, brown, clean-shaven, and just now scowling young man of the accepted American type, firm of jaw, keen of eye, and with a somewhat homely bluntness of feature preventing him from being describable as handsome, or with at best a rough, hard, open-eyed sort of handsomeness that was as unconscious of itself as the beauty of a young animal.

"Wolf, don't be cross," his wife pleaded, in illogical coaxing.

"I'm not cross," he said, with an annoyed glance that humiliated and angered her. "But I don't like this sort of thing, Norma, and I should think you'd know why."

"What sort of thing?" Norma countered, quickly.

"The sort of thing that evidently Mr. Christopher Liggett thinks is fair play!" Wolf said, with youthful bitterness. "Harry saw you both walking up Fifth Avenue yesterday, and Joe Anderson happened to mention that you and a man were lunching together on Thursday, down at the Lafayette. There may be no harm in it——"

"There *may* be!" Norma echoed, firing. "You know very well there *isn't!*"

"You see him every day," Wolf said.

"I *don't* see him every day! But if I did, it wouldn't be Harry Redding's and Joe Anderson's business!"

"No," Wolf said, more mildly, "but it might be mine!"

Norma realized that he was softening under her distress, and she changed her tone.

"Wolf, you know that you can trust me!" she said.

"But I don't know anything about him!" Wolf reminded her. "I know that he's twice your age——"

"He's thirty-eight!"

"Thirty-eight, then—and I know that he's a loafer—a rich man who has nothing else to do but run around with women——"

"I want to ask you to stop talking about something of which you are entirely ignorant!" Norma interrupted, hotly.

"You're the one that's ignorant, Norma," Wolf said, stubbornly, not looking at her. "You are only a little girl; you think it's great fun to be married to one man, and flirting with another! What makes me sick is that a man like Liggett thinks he can get away with it, and you women——"

"If you say that again, I'll not walk with you!" Norma burst in furiously.

"Does it ever occur to you," Wolf asked, equally roused, "that you are my wife?"

"Yes!" Norma answered, breathlessly. "Yes—it does! And why? Because I was afraid I was beginning to care too much for Chris Liggett—because I knew he loved me, he had told me so!—and I went to you because I wanted to be safe—and I told you so, too, Wolf Sheridan, the very day that we were married! I never lied to you! I told you I loved Chris, that I always had! And if you'd been *civil* to me," rushed on Norma, beginning to feel tears mastering her, "if you'd been *decent* to me, I would have gotten over it. I would never have seen him again anyway, after this week, for I told him this morning that I didn't want to go on meeting him—that it wasn't fair to you! But no, you don't trust me and you don't believe me, and consequently—consequently, I don't care what I do, and I'll make you sorry——"

"Don't talk so wildly, Norma," Wolf warned her, in a tone suddenly quiet and sad. "Please don't—people will notice you!"

"I don't care if they do!" Norma said. But she glanced about deserted Eighth Avenue uneasily none the less, and furtively dried her eyes upon a flimsy little transparent handkerchief that somehow tore at her husband's heart. "If you had been a little patient, Wolf——" she pleaded, reproachfully.

"There are times when a man hasn't much use for patience, Norma," Wolf said, still with strange gentleness. "You *did* tell me of liking Liggett—but I thought—I hoped, I guess——!" He paused, and then went on with sudden fierceness: "He's married, Norma, and you're married—I wish there was some way of letting you out of it, as far as I am concerned! Of course you don't have to go to California with me—if that helps. You can get your freedom, easily enough, after awhile. But as long as he's tied, it doesn't seem to me that he has any business——"

His gentle tone disarmed her, and she took up Chris's defence eagerly.

"Wolf, don't you believe there is such a thing as love? Just that two people find out that they belong to each other—whether it's right or wrong, or possible or impossible—and that it may last for ever?"

"No," said Wolf, harshly, "I don't believe it! He's married—doesn't he love his wife?"

"Well, of course he loves her! But this is the first time in all his life that he has—cared—this way!" Norma said.

Wolf made no answer, and she felt that she had scored. They were in the station now, and weaving

their way down toward the big concourse. Norma took her husband's arm.

"Please—please—don't make scenes, Wolf! If you will just believe me that I wouldn't—truly I wouldn't! —hurt you and Aunt Kate for all the world——"

"Ah, Norma," he said, quickly, "I can't take my wife on those terms!" And turning from the ticket window he added, sensibly: "Liggett is tied, of course. But would you like me to leave you here when I go West? Until you are surer of yourself—one way or another? You only have to say so!"

She only had to say so. He had reached, of his own accord, the very point to which she long had hoped to bring him. But perversely, Norma did not quite like to have Wolf go off to Philadelphia with this unpalatable affirmative ringing in his ears. She looked down. A moment's courage now, and she would win everything—and more than everything!—to which Chris had ever urged her. But she felt oddly sad and even hurt by his willingness to give her her way.

"All right!" he said, hastily. "That's understood. I'll tell Mother I don't want you to follow, for awhile. Good-bye, Norma! You're taking the next tube? Wait a minute—I want a *Post*——"

Was he trying to show her how mean he could be? she thought, as with a heartache, and a confused sense of wrong and distress, she slowly went upon her way. Of course that parting was just bravado, of course he felt more than that! She resented it—she thought he had been unnecessarily unkind——

But her spirits slowly settled themselves. Wolf knew what she felt, now, and they had really parted without bitterness. A pleasant sense of being her own

mistress crept over her, her cheeks cooled, her fluttering heart came back to its normal beat. She began to hear herself telling Chris how courageous she had been.

It was too bad—it was one of the sad things of life. But after all, love was love, in spite of Wolf's scepticism, and if it soothed Wolf to be rude, let him have that consolation! What did a little pain more or less signify now? There was no going back. Years from now Wolf would forgive her, recognizing that great love was its own excuse for being. "And if this sort of thing exists only to be crushed and killed," Norma wrote Chris a few days later, "then half the great pictures, the great novels, the great poems and dramas, the great operas, are lies. But you and I know that they are not lies!"

She was unhappy at home, for Aunt Kate was grave and silent, Rose wrapped in the all-absorbing question of the tiny Catherine's meals, and Wolf neither came nor wrote on Saturday night. But in Chris's devotion she was feverishly and breathlessly happy, their meetings—always in public places, and without a visible evidence of their emotion—were hours of the most stimulating delight.

CHAPTER XXX

So MATTERS went on for another ten days. Then suddenly, on a mid-week afternoon, Norma, walking home from a luncheon in a wild and stormy wind, was amazed to see the familiar, low-slung roadster waiting outside her aunt's door when she reached the steps. Chris jumped out and came to meet her as she looked bewilderedly toward it, a Chris curiously different in manner from the man she had left only an hour ago.

"Norma!" he said, quickly, "I found a message when I got to the office. I was to call up Aunt Marianna's house at once. She's ill—*very* ill. They want me, and they want you!"

"Me?" she echoed, blankly. "What for?"

"She's had a stroke," he said, still with that urgent and hurried air, "and Joseph—poor old fellow, he was completely broken up—said that she had been begging them to get hold of you!"

Norma had gotten into the familiar front seat, but now she stayed him with a quick hand.

"Wait a minute, Chris, I'll run up and tell Aunt Kate where I am going!" she said.

"She's gone out. There's nobody there!" he assured her, glancing up at the apartment windows. "I knew you would be coming in, so I waited."

"Then I'll telephone!" the girl said, settling herself again. "But what do you suppose she wants me for?" she asked, returning to the subject of the summons.

"Have they—will they—send for Aunt Annie and Leslie, do you suppose?"

"Leslie is in Florida with the Binneys, most unfortunately. Annie was in Baltimore yesterday, but I believe she was expected home to-day. Joseph said he had gotten hold of Hendrick von Behrens, and I told my clerk to get Acton, and to warn Miss Slater that Alice isn't to be frightened."

"But, Chris—do you suppose she is dying?"

"I don't know—one never does, of course, with paralysis."

"Poor Aunt Alice—it will almost kill her!"

"Yes, it will be terribly hard for her, harder than for any one," he answered. And Norma loved him for the grave sympathy that filled his voice, and for the poise that could make such a speech possible, under the circumstances, without ever a side glance for her.

Then they reached the old house, ran up the steps, and were in the great dark hallway that already seemed to be filled with the shadow of change.

Whispering, solemn-faced maids went to and fro; Joseph was red-eyed; the heavy fur coats of two doctors were flung upon chairs. Norma slipped from her own coat.

"How is she, Joseph?"

"I hardly know, Miss. You're to go up, please, and Regina was to tell one of the nurses at once that you had come, Miss." He delivered his message impassively enough, but then the human note must break through. "I've been with her since she was married, Miss—nigh forty years," the old man faltered, "and I'm afraid she is very bad—very bad, indeed!"

"Oh, I *hope* not!" Norma went noiselessly upstairs,

Chris close behind her. Did she hope not? She hardly knew. But she knew that all this was strangely thrilling—this rush through the tossing windy afternoon to the old house, this sense of being a part of the emergency, this utter departure from the tedious routine of life.

A serious-faced nurse took charge of them, and she and Chris followed her noiselessly into the familiar bedroom that yet looked so altered in its new lifeless order and emptiness. The clutter of personal possessions was already gone, chairs had been straightened and pushed back, and on the bed that had lately been frilled and embroidered in white and pink, and piled with foolish little transparent baby pillows, a fresh, flawless linen sheet was spread. Silence reigned in the wide chamber; but two doctors were standing by the window, and looked at the newcomers with interest, and a second nurse passed them on her way out. Norma vaguely noted the fire, burning clear and bright, the shaded light that showed a chart, on a cleared table, the absence of flowers and plants that made the place seem bare. But after one general impression her attention was riveted upon the sick woman, and with her heart beating quickly with fright she went to stand at the foot of the great walnut bed.

Mrs. Melrose was lying with her head tipped back in pillows; her usually gentle, soft old face looked hard and lined, and was a dark red, and the scanty gray hair, brushed back mercilessly from the temples, and devoid of the usual puffs and transformations, made her look her full sixty years. Her eyes were half-open, but she did not move them, her lips seemed very dry, and occasionally she muttered restlessly, and a third nurse,

bending above her, leaned anxiously near, to catch what she said, and perhaps murmur a soothing response.

This nurse looked sharply at Norma, and breathed rather than whispered: "Mrs. Sheridan?" and when Norma answered with a nod, nodded herself in satisfaction.

"She's been asking and asking for you," she said, in a low clear tone that oddly broke the unnatural silence of the room. Norma, hearing a stir behind her, looked back to see that both doctors had come over to the bed, and were looking down at their patient with a profound concern that their gray heads and their big spectacles oddly emphasized.

"Mrs. Sheridan?" one of them questioned. Norma dared not use her voice, and nodded again. Immediately the doctor leaned over Mrs. Melrose, and said in a clear and encouraging tone: "Here is Mrs. Sheridan now!"

Mrs. Melrose merely moaned heavily in answer, and Norma said softly, to the doctor who had spoken:

"I think perhaps she was asking for my aunt—who is also Mrs. Sheridan!"

Before the doctor, gravely considering, could answer, the sick woman startled them all by saying, almost fretfully, in a surprisingly clear and quiet voice:

"No—no—no, I want you, Norma!"

She groped blindly about with her hand, as she spoke, and Norma kneeled down, and covered it with both her own. Mrs. Melrose immediately began to breathe more easily, and sank at once into the stupor from which she had only momentarily roused.

Norma looked for instruction to the doctor, who presently decided that there was nothing more to be

gained for a time; she joined them presently, with Chris, in the adjoining room. This was the same old room of her first visit to the house, with the same rich old brocaded paper and fringed rep draperies, with the same pictures, and a few new ones, lined on the mantel.

"Where are Mrs. von Behrens and Leslie?" Doctor Murray, who had known all the family intimately for years, asked Chris.

"Is it so serious, Doctor?" Christopher asked in turn, when he had answered. The doctor, glancing toward the closed door, nodded gravely.

"A matter of a day or two," he said, looking at the other old doctor for confirmation. "She was apparently perfectly normal last night, went to bed at her usual hour," he said, "this morning she complained of her head, when the maid went in at ten, said that she must have hurt it—struck it against something. The maid, a sensible young woman, was uneasy, and telephoned for me. Unfortunately, I was in Westchester this morning, but I got here at about one o'clock and found her as she is now. She has had a stroke—probably several slight shocks."

"Why, but she was perfectly well day before yesterday!" Norma said, in amazement. "And only ten days ago she came back from Florida, and said that she never felt better!"

"That is frequently the history of the disease," the second doctor said, sagely. And, glancing at his watch, he added, "I don't think you will need me again, Doctor Murray?"

"What are the chances of her—knowing anybody?" Chris asked.

"She may very probably have another lucid interval," Doctor Murray said. "If Mrs. Sheridan could arrange to stay, it would be advisable. She asked for her daughters, but she seemed even more anxious that we should send for—*you*." He glanced at Norma, with a little old-fashioned bow.

Mrs. Sheridan could stay, of course. She would telephone home, and advise Aunt Kate, at once. Indeed, so keen was Norma's sense almost of enjoyment in this thrilling hour that she would have been extremely sorry to leave the house. It was sad, it was dreadful, of course, to think that poor old Aunt Marianna was so ill, but at the same time it was most dramatic. She and Chris settled themselves before the fire in the upstairs sitting-room with Doctor Murray, who entertained them with mild reminiscences of the Civil War. The storm was upon the city now, rain slashed at the windows and the wind howled bitterly.

There was whispering in the old house, quiet footsteps, muffled voices at the door and telephone. At about six o'clock Chris went home, to tell Alice, with what tenderness he might, of the impending sorrow. Regina, who had been weeping bitterly, and would speak to no one, brought Norma and the doctor two smoking hot cups of bouillon on a tray.

"And you mustn't get tired, Mrs. Sheridan," one of the nurses, herself healthily odorous of a beef and apple-pie dinner, said kindly to Norma, at about seven o'clock. "There'll be coffee and sandwiches all night. This is a part of our lives, you know, and we get used to it, but it's hard for those not accustomed to it."

At about nine o'clock in the evening Chris came back. Alice had received the news bravely, he said; there had

been no hysteria and she kept admirable control of herself, and he had left her ready for sleep. But it had hit her very hard. Miss Slater had promised him that she would put a sleeping powder into Alice's regular ten o'clock glass of hot milk, and let him know when she was safely off.

"She is very thankful that you are here, she was uneasy every instant that I stayed away!" he said softly to Norma, and Norma nodded her approval. Long before eleven o'clock they had the report that Alice was sleeping soundly under the combined effect of the powder and Miss Slater's repeated and earnest assurance that there was no immediate danger as regarded her mother.

Chris and Norma and the doctor and two of the nurses went down to the dining-room, and had sandwiches and coffee, and talked long and sadly of the briefness and mutability of mortal life. When they went upstairs again the doctor stretched out for some rest, on the sitting-room couch, and Norma went to her own old room, and got into her comfortable, thick padded wrapper and warm slippers. The night was still wet and stormy, and had turned cold. Hail rattled on the window sills.

Then she crept into the sick-room, and joined the nurses in their unrelenting vigil. Mrs. Melrose was still lying back, her eyes half-open, her face darkly flushed, her lips moving in an incoherent mutter. Now and then they caught the syllables of Norma's name, and once she said "Kate!" so sharply that everyone in the sick chamber started.

Norma, leaning back in a great chair by the bed, mused and pondered as the slow hours went by. The

softened lights touched the nurses' crisp aprons, the fire was out now, and only the two softly palpitating disks from the shaded lamps dimly illumined the room.

Annie and Theodore and Alice had all been born in this very room, Norma thought. She imagined Aunt Marianna, a handsome, stout, radiant young woman, in the bustles and pleats of the early eighties, with the flowing ruffles of Theodore's christening robe spreading over her lap. How wonderful life must have seemed to her then, rich and young, and adored by her husband, and with her first-born child receiving all the homage due the heir of the great name and fortune! Then came Annie, and some years later Alice, and how busy and happy their mother must have been with plenty of money for schools and frocks, trips to the country with her handsome, imperious children; trips to Europe when no desire need be denied them, all the world the playground for the fortunate Melroses!

How short the perspective must look now, thought Norma, to that troubled brain that was struggling among closing shadows, nearer and nearer every slow clocktick to the end. How loathsome it must be to the prisoned spirit, this handsome, stifling room, this army of maids and nurses and doctors so decorously resigned to facing the last scene of all. Why, the poorest child in the city to-night, healthily asleep in someunspeakable makeshift for a bed, possessed what all the Melrose money could not buy for this moaning, suffocating old autocrat.

"I should like to die out on a hillside, under the stars," thought Norma, "with no one to watch me. This is—somehow—so horrible!"

And she crept toward the bed and slipped to her knees

again, forcing herself against her inclination—for somehow prayers seemed to have nothing tc do with this scene—to pray for the departing soul.

"Norma," the old lady said, suddenly, opening her eyes. She looked quietly and intelligently at the girl.

"Yes, dear!" Norma stammered, with a frightened glance toward the nurses.

These were instantly intent, at the bedside. But Mrs. Melrose paid no attention to them. She patted Norma's hand.

"Late for you, dear!" she whispered. "Night!" Obediently she drank something the nurse put to her lips, and when she spoke it was more clearly. A moment later Doctor Murray had her pulse between his nerveless fingers. She moved her eyes lazily to smile at him. "Tide running out, old friend!" she said, in a deep, rich voice. The doctor smiled, shaking his head, but Norma saw his eyes glisten behind his glasses.

Suddenly Mrs. Melrose frowned, and began to show excitement.

"Norma!" she said, quickly. "I want Chris!"

"Right here, Aunt Marianna!" Norma answered, soothingly. And Chris was indeed leaning over the bed almost before she finished speaking.

"I want to talk to you and Chris," the old lady said, contentedly closing her eyes. "Everybody else out!" she whispered.

The room was immediately cleared. "It can't hurt her now!" Doctor Murray looked rather than said to Norma as he passed her. Chris watched the closing doors, sat beside the bed's head with one arm half-supporting his mother-in-law's pillows.

"We're all alone, Aunt Marianna," he said. "Leslie

and Annie will be here in the morning, and Alice told me to tell you that she hoped——"

"Chris," the sick woman interrupted, gazing at him with an intense and painful stare, "this child here—Norma! I—I must straighten it all out now, Chris. Kate knows. Kate has all the papers—letters—Louison's letters! Ask Kate——"

She shut her eyes. Norma and Chris looked at one another in bewilderment. There was a long silence.

"So now you know!" Mrs. Melrose said, presently, returning to full consciousness as naturally as she had before. "I told you, didn't I?" she asked, faintly anxious.

"Don't bother now, Aunt Marianna," the girl begged in distress. "To-morrow——"

"Louison," Mrs. Melrose said, "was Annie's French maid—very superior girl!"

"I remember her—Theodore's wife," Chris said, eager to help her.

"And she was this girl's mother," Mrs. Melrose added, clasping Norma's fingers. "You understand that, Chris?"

"Yes, darling—we understand!" Norma said, with a nod to Chris that he was to humour her. But Chris looked only strangely troubled.

"Annie's poor baby lived—Kate brought it home from France, and we named it Leslie," the invalid said, clearly. "I couldn't—I couldn't forget it, Chris. I used to go see it—at Kate's. And then, when it was three, I met Louison—poor girl, I had been cruel to her—and Theodore was far off in California—dying, we knew. And I met Louison in Brooklyn. And I had a sudden idea, Chris! I told her to go to Kate, and get

Annie's baby, and bring it to me as if it was her own. I told her to! I told her to say that it was her baby—Theodore's baby. And she did, Chris, and I paid her well for it. She brought Leslie here, and Annie never knew—nobody ever knew! But I never knew that Louison had a baby of her own, Chris—I never knew that! Louison hated me, and she never told me she had a little girl. No—no—no, I never knew that!"

"Then Leslie—is—Annie's child by Müller, the riding master!" Chris whispered, staring blindly ahead of him. "And what—what became of the other child—Theodore's child?"

"Louison kept her until she was five," the old lady explained, eagerly, "and then she wanted to marry again, and she had to go live in a wild sort of place, in Canada. She didn't want to take the little girl there, and she remembered Kate Sheridan, who had had the other baby, and who had been so good to it—so devoted to it! And she went there, Chris, and left her baby there."

"And that baby——" Chris began.

"Yes. That was Norma!" Mrs. Melrose said. "It is all Norma's, the whole thing—and you must take care that she gets it, Chris. I—even my will, dear, only gives Norma the Melrose Building and some bonds. But those are for Leslie, now, all the rest—the whole estate goes to Theodore's child—Norma. You must forgive me if I did it all wrong. I meant it for the best. I never knew that you were living, dear, until Kate brought you here three years ago. She didn't dare do it until your mother died; she had promised she would never tell a living soul. But Louison softened toward the end, and wrote Kate she must use her own judgment. And Kate—Kate—knows all about it——"

The voice thickened. The old lady raised herself in bed.

"That man—behind you, Chris!" she gasped. Chris put her down again, Norma flew for help. The muttering and the heavy breathing recommenced. Nurses and doctors ran back, Regina came to kneel at the foot of the bed.

Another slight stroke, they said later, when they were all about the fire in the next room again. Norma was white, her eyes glittering, her bitten lips scarlet in her colourless face. Chris looked stunned.

But he found time for just one aside, as the endless night wore on. Annie had arrived, superbly horrified and stricken, and Acton was there. Mrs. Melrose was still breathing. The sickly light of a winter morning was tugging at the shutters.

"Norma," Chris said, "do you realize what a tremendous thing has happened to you? Do you realize who you are? You are a rich woman now, my dear!"

"But do you believe it?" she asked, in a low tone.

"I know it is true! It explains everything," he answered. "It will be a cruel blow to Leslie—poor child, and Annie, too. Alice, I think, need never know. But Norma—even though this doesn't seem the time or the place, let me be the first to congratulate you on your new position—my old friend Theodore's daughter, and the last of the Melroses!"

At seven o'clock in the morning Norma, exhausted with excitement and emotion, took a hot bath, and finding things unchanged in the sick-room, except that the lights had been extinguished, and the winter daylight was drearily mingling with firelight, went on downstairs for coffee and for one more conference with the blinking nurses and the tired old doctor. She found herself too

shaken to eat, but the hot drink was wonderfully soothing and stimulating, and for the first time, as she stood looking out into the street from the dining-room window, a sense of power and pride began to thrill her. Old people must die, of course, and after this sad and dark scene was over—then what? Then what? Then she would be in Leslie's long-envied place, the heiress, the important figure among all the changes that followed.

"If you please, Mrs. Sheridan——?" It was Joseph, haggard and white, who had come softly behind her to interrupt her thoughts. She glanced with quick apprehension toward the hall stairway. There had been a change——?

No, it was the telephone, Miss. Norma, puzzled by the old butler's stricken air, went to the instrument. It was Miss Slater.

"Norma," Miss Slater said, agitatedly, "is Mr. Liggett—there?"

"I think he's with Aunt Annie, upstairs, but he's going home about eight," Norma answered. "There is no change. Is Aunt Alice awake? Mr. Liggett wanted to be there when she woke!"

"No—she's not awake," the other woman's voice said, solemnly. "She went to sleep like a child last night, Norma. But about half an hour ago I went in—she hadn't called me—it was just instinct, I suppose! She was lying—hadn't changed her position even——"

"*What's that!*" Norma cried, in a whisper that was like a scream. The grave voice and the sudden break of tears chilled her to the soul.

"We've had Doctor Merrill here," Miss Slater said. "Norma, you'll have to tell him—God help us all! She's gone!"

CHAPTER XXXI

Mrs. Melrose never spoke again, or showed another flicker of the clear and normal intelligence that she had shown in the night. But she still breathed, and the long, wet day dragged slowly, in the big, mournful old house, until late in the unnatural afternoon. People—all sorts of people—were coming and going now, and being answered, or being turned away; a few privileged old friends came softly up the carpeted stairs, and cried quietly with Annie, who looked unbelievably old and ashen under the double shock. Norma began to hear, on all sides, respectful and sympathetic references to "the family." The family felt this, and would like that, the family was not seeing any one, the family must be protected and considered in every way. The privileged old friends talked with strange men in the lower hall, and were heard saying "I suppose so" dubiously, to questions of hats and veils and carriages and the church.

Chris was gone all day, but at four o'clock an urgent message was sent him, and he and Acton came into Mrs. Melrose's room about half an hour later, for the end. His face was ghastly, and he seemed almost unable to understand what was said to him, but he was very quiet.

Norma never forgot the scene. She knelt on one side of the bed, praying with all the concentration and fervour that she could rally under the circumstances. But her frightened, tired eyes were impressed with every

detail of the dark old stately bedroom none the less. This was the end of the road, for youth and beauty and power and wealth, this sunken, unrecognizable face, this gathering of shadows among the dull, wintry shadows of the afternoon.

Annie was kneeling, too, her fine, unringed hands clasping one of her mother's hands. Chris sat against the back of the bed, half-supporting the piled pillows, in a futile attempt to make more easy the fighting breath, and Acton and Hendrick von Behrens, grave and awed, stood beside him, their faces full of sympathy and distress. There was an outer fringe of nurses, doctors, maids; there was even an audible whisper from one of them that caused Annie to frown, annoyed and rebuking, over her shoulder.

Minutes passed. Norma, pressing her cheek against the hand she held, began a Litany, very low. Suddenly the dying woman opened her eyes.

"Yes—yes—yes!" she whispered, eagerly, and with a break in her frightened voice Norma began more clearly, "Our Father, Who art in Heaven——" and they all joined in, somewhat awkwardly and uncertainly.

Mrs. Melrose sank back; she had raised herself just a fraction of an inch to speak. Now her head fell, and Norma saw the florid colour drain from her face as wine drains from an overturned glass. A leaden pallor settled suddenly upon her. When the prayer was finished they waited—eyed each other—waited again. There was no other breath.

"Doctor——" Annie cried, choking. The doctor gently laid down the limp hand he had raised; it was already cool. And behind him the maids began to sob and wail unrebuked.

Norma went out into the hall dazed and shaken. This was her first sight of death. It made her feel a little faint and sick. Chris came and talked to her for a few minutes; Annie had collapsed utterly, and was under the doctor's care; Acton broke down, too, and Norma heard Chris attempting to quiet him. There was audible sobbing all over the house when, an hour or two later, Alice's beautiful body in a magnificent casket was brought to lie in the old home beside the mother she had adored.

The fragrance of masses and masses of damp flowers began to penetrate everywhere, and Norma made occasional pilgrimages in to Annie's bedside, and told her what beautiful offerings were coming and coming and coming. Joseph had reinforcements of sympathetic, black-clad young men, who kept opening the front door, and murmuring at the muffled telephone. Annie's secretary, a young woman about Norma's age, was detailed by Hendrick to keep cards and messages straight—for every little courtesy must be acknowledged on Annie's black-bordered card within a few weeks' time—and Norma heard Joseph telephoning several of the prominent florists that Mr. Liggett had directed that all flowers were to come to the Melrose house. Nothing was overlooked.

When Norma went to her room, big boxes were on the bed, boxes that held everything that was simple and beautiful in mourning: plain, charming frocks, a smart long seal-bordered coat, veils and gloves, small and elegant hats, even black-bordered handkerchiefs. She dressed herself soberly, yet not without that mournful thrill that fitness and becomingness lends to bereavement. When she went back to Annie's side Annie was

in beautiful lengths of lustreless crape, too; they settled down to low, sad conversation, with a few of the privileged old friends. Chris was nowhere to be seen, but at about six o'clock Acton came in to show them a telegram from Leslie, flying homeward. Judge Lee was hurrying to them from Washington, and for a few minutes Annie's handsome, bewildered little boys came in with a governess, and she cried over them, and clung to them forlornly.

After a distracted half-hour in the dining-room, when she and Acton and Annie's secretary had soup and salad from a sort of buffet meal that was going on there indefinitely, Norma went upstairs to find that the door to the front upper sitting-room, closed for hours, was set ajar, and to see a vague mass of beautiful flowers within —white and purple flowers, and wreaths of shining dark round leaves. With a quick-beating heart she stepped softly inside, and went to kneel at the nearer coffin, and cover her face with her shaking hands. The thick sweetness of the wet leaves and blossoms enveloped her. Candles were burning; there was no other light.

Two or three other women were in the room, catching their breath up through their nostrils with little gasps, pressing folded handkerchiefs against their trembling mouths, letting fresh tears well from their tear-reddened eyes. Chris was standing a few feet away from the white-clad, flower-circled, radiant sleeper who had been Alice; his arms were folded, his splendid dark gaze fell upon her with a sort of sombre calm; he seemed entirely unconscious of the pitying and sorrowful friends who were moving noiselessly to and fro.

In the candlelight there was a wavering smile on Alice's quiet face, her broad forehead was unruffled, and

her mouth mysteriously sweet. Norma's eyes fell upon a familiar black coat, on the kneeling woman nearest her, and with a start she recognized Aunt Kate.

They left the room together a few minutes later, and Norma led her aunt to her own room, where they talked tenderly of the dead. The older woman was touched by the slender little black figure, and badly shaken by the double tragedy, and she cried quite openly. Norma had Regina send her up some tea, and petted and fussed about her in her little daughterly way.

"I saw about Miss Alice this morning, but I had no idea the poor old lady——!" Mrs. Sheridan commented sadly. "Well, well, it seems only yesterday that here, in this very house—and they were all young then——" Aunt Kate fell silent, and mused for a moment, before adding briskly: "But now, will they want you, Norma, after the funeral, I mean? Wolf wrote me——"

"I don't think Aunt Annie wants me now," Norma said, and with a heightened colour she added, suddenly, "But I belong here, now, Aunt Kate—I know who I am at last!"

Mrs. Sheridan's face did not move; but an indefinable tightness came about her mouth, and an indefinable sharpness to her eyes. She looked at Norma without speaking.

"Aunt Marianna told me," the girl said, simply. "You're sorry," she added, quickly, "I can see you are!"

"No—I wouldn't say that, Baby!" But Mrs. Sheridan spoke heavily, and ended on a sigh. There was a short silence.

Then Regina came in with a note for Norma, who read it, and turned to her aunt.

"It's Chris—he wants very much to see you before you go away," she said. "I wonder if you would ask Mr. Liggett to come in here, Regina?" But five minutes later, when Chris came in, he looked so ill that she was quick to spare him. "Chris, wouldn't to-morrow do—you look so tired!"

"I *am* tired," Chris said, after quietly accepting Mrs. Sheridan's murmured condolence, with his hand holding hers, as if he liked the big, sympathetic woman. "But I want this off my mind before I see Judge Lee! You are right, Mrs. Sheridan," he said, with a sort of boyish gruffness, not yet releasing her hands, "my wife was an angel. I always knew it—but I wish I could tell her so just once more!"

"Ah, that's the very hardest thing about death," Mrs. Sheridan said, sitting down, and quite frankly wiping from her eyes the tears that sympathy for his sorrow had made spring again. "We'd always want one more hour!"

"But Norma perhaps has told you——?" Chris said, in a different tone. "Told you of the—the remarkable talk we had yesterday—with my poor mother-in-law——"

Kate Sheridan nodded gravely.

"Yes," she answered, almost reluctantly, "Norma is Theodore Melrose's child. I have letters—all their letters. I knew her mother, that was Louison Courtot, well. It was a mixed-up business—but you've got the whole truth at last. I've lost more than one night's sleep over my share of it, Mr. Liggett, thinking who this child was, and whether I had the right to hold my tongue.

"I was a widow when I went to Germany with Mrs.

Melrose. She begged and begged me to, for she was sick with worry about Miss Annie. Miss Annie had been over there about eight months, and something she'd written had made her mother feel that she was ill, or in trouble. Well, I didn't want to leave my own children, but she coaxed me so hard that I went. We sailed without cabling, and went straight to Leipsic, and to the dreadful, dreary pension that Miss Annie was in—a dismal, lonely place. She came downstairs to see her mother, and I'll never forget the scream she gave, for she'd had no warning, poor child, and Müller had taken all her money, and she was—well, we could see how she was. She began laughing and crying, and her mother did, too, but Mrs. Melrose stopped after a few minutes, and we couldn't stop Miss Annie at all. She shrieked and sobbed and strangled until we saw she was ill, and her mother gave me one look, and bundled her right out to the carriage, and off to a better place, and we got a doctor and a nurse. But all that night she was in danger of her life. I went in to her room that evening, to put things in order, and she was lying on the bed like a dead thing—white, sick, and with her eyes never moving off her mother's face. I could hear her murmuring the whole story, the shame and the bitter cruelty of it, crying sometimes—and her mother crying, too.

"'And, Mama,' she said—the innocence of her! 'Mama, did the doctor tell you that there might have been a baby?—I didn't know it myself until a few weeks ago! And that's why they're so frightened about me now. But,' she said, beginning to cry again, 'I should have hated it—I've always hated it, and I'd rather have it all over—I don't want to have to face anything more!'

"Well, it looked then as if she couldn't possibly live through the night, and all her mother could think of was to comfort her. She told her that they would go away and forget it all, and Miss Annie clung to her through the whole terrible thing. We none of us got any sleep that night, and I think it was at about three o'clock the next morning that I crept to the door, and the doctor—Doctor Leslie—an old English doctor who was very kind, came to the door and gave me the poor little pitiful baby in a blanket. I almost screamed when I took it, for the poor little soul was alive, working her little mouth! I took her to my room, and indeed I baptized her myself—I named her Mary for my mother, and Leslie for the doctor, but I never thought she'd need a name—then. She was under four pounds, and with a little claw like a monkey's paw, and so thin we didn't dare dress her—we thought she was three months too soon, then, and I just sat watching her, waiting for her to die, and thinking of my own——!

"Miss Annie was given up the next day, she'd gone into a brain fever, but my poor little soul was wailing a good healthy wail—I remember I cried bitterly when the doctor told me not to hope for her! But she lived —and on the fourth day Mrs. Melrose sent us away, and we went and stayed in the country for two months after that.

"Then I had a letter from the Riviera, the first that'd come. Miss Annie was getting well, her hair was coming out curly, and she hardly remembered anything about what had happened at all. She wasn't nineteen then, poor child! She had cried once, her mother wrote, and had said she thanked God the baby had died and that was all she ever said of it.

"I brought the baby home, and for nearly three years she lived with my own, and of course Mrs. Melrose paid me for it. And then one day Louison Courtot came to see me—I'd known her, of course—Mr. Theodore's wife, that had been Miss Annie's maid. She had a letter from Mrs. Melrose, and she took Leslie away, and gave her to her grandmother—just according to plan. Well, I didn't like it—though it gave the child her rights, but it didn't seem honest. I had no call to interfere, and a few months later Mrs. Melrose gave me the double house in Brooklyn, that you'll well remember, Norma—and your own father made out the deed of gift, Mr. Chris——!

"And then, perhaps a year later, Louison came to call on me again, and with her was a little girl—four years old, and I looked at her, and looked at Louison, and I said, 'My God—that's a Melrose!' She said, yes, it was Theodore's child."

"Norma!" Chris said.

"Norma—and I remember her as if it was yesterday! With a blue velvet coat on her, and a white collar, and the way she dragged off her little mittens to go over and play with Rose and Wolf—and the little coaxing air she had! So then Louison told me the story, how she had never told Mrs. Melrose that Theodore really had a daughter, because she hated her so! But she was going to be married again, and go to Canada, and she wanted me to keep the baby until she could send for her. I said I would see how it went, but I could see then that there never was in the world——" Mrs. Sheridan interrupted herself, coughed, and glanced at the girl. "Well, we liked Norma right then and there!" she finished, a little tamely.

"Oh, Aunt Kate!" Norma said, smiling through tears, her hand tight upon the older woman's, "you never will praise me!"

"So Norma," the story went on, "had her supper that night between my two children, and for fourteen years she never knew that she wasn't our own. And perhaps she never would have known if Louison hadn't written me that she was in a hospital—she was to have an operation, and she was willing at last to make peace with her husband's family. In the same letter was her husband's note that she was gone, so I had to use my own judgment then. And when I heard Norma talk of the rich girls she saw in the bookstore, Mr. Chris, and knew how she loved what money could do for her, it seemed to me that at least I must tell her grandmother the truth. So we came here, three years ago, and if it wasn't for Miss Alice's mistake about her, perhaps the story would have come out then! But that's all the truth."

Chris nodded, his arms folded on his chest, his tired face very thoughtful.

"It makes her a rich woman, Mrs. Sheridan," he said.

"I suppose so, sir. I understand Mr. Melrose—the old gentleman—left everything to his son, Theodore."

"But not only that," Chris said. "She can claim every penny that has ever been paid over to Leslie, all through her minority, and since she came of age, and she also inherits the larger part of her grandmother's estate, under the will. Probably Mrs. Melrose would have changed that, if she had lived when all this came to light, and given that same legacy to Leslie, but we can't act on that supposition. The

court will probably feel that a very grave injustice has been done Norma, and exact the full arrears."

"But, Chris," Norma said, quickly, "surely some way can be found to *give* Leslie all that would have come to me——"

"Well, that, of course, would be pure generosity on your part!" he said, quietly. "However, it would seem to me desirable all round," he added, "to keep this in the family."

"Oh, I think so!" Norma agreed, eagerly.

"Annie and Hendrick must be informed, and, as Leslie's mother, Annie will provide for her some day, of course. We'll discuss all that later. But to-day I only wanted to clear up a few points before I see Judge Lee. He has the will, I believe. He will be here to-morrow morning. In the meanwhile, I think I would say nothing, Norma, just because Annie is so upset, and if Leslie heard any garbled story, before she got here——"

"Oh, I agree with you entirely, Chris! Anything that makes it easier all round!" Norma could afford to be magnanimous and agreeable. She would not have been human not to feel herself the most interesting figure in all this dramatic situation, not to know that thoughtfulness and generosity were the most charming parts of her new rôle. Quietly, affectionately, she went to the door with Aunt Kate.

"I wish I could go home with you!" she said. "But I think they need me here! And if Wolf should come up Saturday, Aunt Kate, you'll tell him about the funeral——"

"Rose said he wasn't coming up on Saturday," his mother said. "But if he does, of course he'll under-

stand! Remember, Norma," she added, drawing the girl aside a moment, in the lower hall, "remember that they've all been very kind to you, dear! It's going to be hard for them all!"

"Yes, I know!" Norma said, hastily, the admonition not to her taste.

"And what you and Wolf will do with all that money——!" her aunt mused, shaking her head. "Well, one thing at a time! But I know," she finished, fondly, "my girl will show them all what a generous and a lovely nature she has, in all the changes and shifts!"

Clever Aunt Kate! Norma smiled to herself as she went upstairs. She had hundreds of times before this guided the girl by premature confidence and praise; she knew how Norma loved the approbation of those about her.

Not but what Norma meant to be everything that was broad and considerate now; she had assumed that position from the beginning. Leslie's chagrin, Aunt Annie's consternation, should be respected and humoured. They had sometimes shown her the arrogant, the supercilious side of the Melrose nature, in the years gone by. Now she, the truest Melrose of them all, would show them real greatness of soul. She would talk it all over with Wolf, of course——

She missed Wolf. It was, as always, a curiously unsatisfying atmosphere, this of the old Melrose house. The whispers, the hushed footsteps, the lowered voices, Aunt Annie's plaintive heroism in her superb crapes, the almost belligerent loyalty of the intimate friends who praised and marvelled at her, the costly flowers—thousands of dollars' worth of them—the extra men helping Joseph to keep everything decorous and beauti-

ful—somehow it all sickened Norma, and she wished that Wolf could come and take her for a walk, and talk to her about it. He would be interested in it all, and he would laugh at her account of the undertakers, and he would break into elementary socialism when the cost of the whole pompous pageant was estimated.

And what would he think of her new-found wealth? Norma tried to imagine it, but somehow she could not think of Wolf as very much affected. He hated society, primarily, and he would never be idle, not for the treasures of India. He would let her spend it as she pleased, and go on working rapturously at his valves and meters and gauges, perhaps delighted if she bought him the costliest motor-car made, or the finest of mechanical piano-players, but quite as willing that the pearls about his wife's throat should cost fifty dollars as fifty thousand, and quite as anxious that the heiress of the Melroses should "make good" with his associate workers as if she had been still a little clerk from Biretta's Bookshop!

But cheerfully indifferent as he was to everything that made life worth living to such a man as Christopher Liggett, she knew that he would not go to California without her unless there was a definite break between them. She knew she could not persuade him to leave her here, as a normal and pleasant solution, just until everything was settled, and until they could see a little further ahead. No, Wolf was annoyingly conventional where his wife was concerned: her place was with him, unless for some secondary reason they had decided to part. And she knew that if he let her go it would be because he felt that he never should have claimed her—that, in the highest sense, he never had had her at all.

CHAPTER XXXII

MOVING automatically through the solemn scenes of the next two days, that, mused Norma, must be the solution. Wolf must go alone to California. Not because she did not love him—who could help loving him indeed?—but because she loved Chris more—or differently, at least, and she belonged to Chris's world now, by every right of birth, wealth, and position.

"Of course you must stay here," Chris said, positively, on the one occasion when they spoke of her plans. "In the first place, there is the estate to settle, we shall need you. Then there are books—pictures—all that sort of thing to manage, the old servants to dispose of, and probably this house to sell—but we can discuss that. Judge Lee has felt for a long time that this is the right site for a big apartment house, especially if we can get hold of Boyer's plot. You had better take a suite at one of the hotels, and later we can look up the right sort of an apartment for you."

Not a word of his personal hopes; missing them she felt oddly cheated.

"Wolf goes to California next month," she said. Christopher gave her a sharp, quizzing look.

"But I think you had decided, weeks ago, that you were not going?"

"Yes—I've told him so!" she faltered. She felt strangely lost and forlorn, releasing her hold on Wolf, and yet not able to claim Christopher's support. It

was contemptible—it was weak in her, she felt, but she could not quite choke down her hunger for one reassuring word from Chris. "I feel so—lonely, Chris," she said.

He gave a quick, uneasy glance about the breakfast-room, where they were having a hasty three-o'clock luncheon. No one was within hearing.

"You understand my position now," he said.

"Oh, of course!" But she felt oddly chilled. Chris as the bereaved husband and son-in-law was perfect, of course, almost too perfect. If Wolf loved a woman——

But then the fancy of Wolf, married, and confessedly loving a woman who was another man's wife, was absurd, anyway. Wolf did not belong to the world where such things were common, it was utterly foreign to his nature, with all the rest. Wolf did not go to operas and picture galleries and polo matches; he did not know how to comport himself at afternoon teas or summer lunches at the country club.

And Norma's life would be spent in this atmosphere now. She would get her frocks from Madame Modiste, and her hats from the Avenue specialists; she would be a smart and a conspicuous little figure at Lenox and Bar Harbour and Newport; she would spend her days with masseuses and dressmakers, and with French and Italian teachers. She could travel, some day—but here the thought of Chris crept in, and she was a little hurt at Chris. His exquisite poise, his sureness of being absolutely correct, was one of his charms. But it was a little hard not to have the depth of his present feeling for her sweep him off his feet just occasionally. He had, indeed, shown her far more daring favour when

Alice was alive—meeting Norma down town, driving her about, walking with her where they might reasonably fear to be seen now and then.

It came to her painfully that, even there, Chris's respect for the conventions of his world was not at fault. Flirtations, "crushes," "cases," and "suitors" were entirely acceptable in the circle that Chris so conspicuously ornamented. To pay desperate attentions to a pretty young married woman was quite excusable; it would have been universally understood.

But to show the faintest trace of interest in her while his wife lay dead, and while his house was plunged into mourning, no—Chris would not do that. That would not be good form, it would be censured as not being compatible with the standard of a gentleman. His conduct now must be beyond criticism, he was the domestic dictator in this, as in every emergency. Norma listened while he and Hendrick and Annie discussed the funeral.

They were in the big upstairs bedroom that Annie had appropriated to herself during these days. Annie was resting on a couch in a nest of little pillows, her long bare hands very white against the blackness of her gown. Hendrick did most of the talking, Chris listening thoughtfully, accepting, rejecting, Norma a mere spectator. She decided that Annie was playing her part with a stimulating consciousness of its dignity, and that Chris was not much better. Honest, red-faced Hendrick was only genuinely anxious to arrange these details without a scene.

"I take Annie up the aisle," Chris said, "you'll be a pall-bearer, Hendrick. Mrs. Lee says that the Judge feels he is too old to serve, so he will follow me,

with Leslie. She gets here this afternoon. Then Acton brings Norma, and that fills the family pew. Now, in the next pew——"

It reminded Norma of something, she could not for a moment remember what. Then it came to her. Of course!—Leslie's wedding. They had discussed precedence and pews just that way. Music, too. Hendrick was making a note of music—Alice's favourite dirge was to be played, and "Come Ye Disconsolate" which had been sung at Theodore's funeral, thirteen years ago, and at his father's, seven years before that, was to be sung by the famous church choir.

The church was unfortunately small, so cards were to be given to the few hundreds that it would accommodate. Hendrick suggested a larger church, but Annie shut her eyes, leaning back, and faintly shaking her head.

"Please—Hendrick—*please!*" she articulated, wearily. "Mama loved that church—and there's so little that we can do now—so little that she ever wanted, dear old saint!"

It was not hypocrisy, Norma thought. Annie had been a good daughter. Indeed she had been unusually loyal, as the daughters of Annie's set saw their filial duties. But something in this overwhelming, becoming grief, combined with so lively a sense of what was socially correct, jarred unpleasantly on the younger woman. Of course, funerals had to have management, like everything else. And it was only part of Annie's code to believe that an awkwardness now, a social error ever so faint, an opportunity given the world for amusement or criticism, would reflect upon the family and upon the dead.

Norma carried on long mental conversations with Wolf, criticizing or defending the Melroses. She imagined herself telling him of the shock it had given her to realize that her grandmother's body was barely cold before an autocratic and noisy French hairdresser had arrived, demanding electric heat and hand-glasses as casually as if his customer had been the bustling, vain old lady of a week ago. She laughed secretly whenever she recalled the solemn undertaker who had solicited her own aid in filling out a blank. His first melancholy question, "And thud dame of the father——" Norma had momentarily supposed to be the beginning of a prayer, and it had been with an almost hysterical revulsion of feeling that she had said: "Oh, her father's name? Oh, Francis Dabney Murison."

Wolf, who would not laugh at one tenth of the things that amused Chris, or that Annie found richly funny, would laugh at these little glimpses of a formal funeral, Norma knew, and he would remember other odd bits of reading that were in the same key—from Macaulay, or Henry George, or a scrap of newspaper that had chanced to be pasted upon an engine-house wall.

Leslie came into the house late on the afternoon of Friday, and there was much fresh crying between her and Annie. Leslie had on new black, too, "just what I could grab down there," she explained—and was pettish and weary with fatigue and the nervous shock. She gave only the side of her cheek to Acton's dutiful kiss, and answered his question about the baby with an impatient, "Oh, heavens, she's all *right!* What could be the matter with her? She did have a cold, but now she's all right—and when I'm half-crazy about Grandma and poor Aunt Alice, I do *wish* you wouldn't take

me up so quickly. I've been travelling all night, and my head is splitting! If it was *I* that had the cold, I don't believe you'd be so fussy!"

"Poor little girl, it's hard for you not to have seen them once more," Christopher said, tenderly, failing to meet the half-amused and half-indignant glance that Norma sent him. Leslie burst into self-pitying tears, and held tight to his hand, as they all sat down in Annie's room.

"I believe I feel it most for you, Uncle Chris," she sobbed.

"It changes my life—ends it as surely as it did hers," Chris said, quietly. "Just now—well, I don't see ahead—just now. After awhile I believe she'll come back to me—her sweetness and goodness and bigness—for Alice was the biggest woman, and the finest, that I ever knew; and then I'll try to live again—just as she would have had me. And meanwhile, I try to comfort myself that I tried to show her, in whatever clumsy way I could, that I appreciated her!"

"You not only showed her, you showed all the world, Chris," Annie said, stretching a hand toward him. Norma felt a sudden uprising of some emotion singularly akin to contempt.

A maid signalled her, and she stepped to the dressing-room door. A special delivery letter had come from Wolf. The maid went away again, but Norma stood where she was, reading it. Wolf had written:

DEAR NORMA,

Mother wrote me of all that you have been going through, and I am as sorry as I can be for all their trouble, and glad that they have you to help them through. Mother also told me of the change in your position there; I had always known vaguely that we didn't

understand it all. I remember now your coming to us in Brooklyn, and your mother crying when she went away. I know this will make a difference to you, and be one more reason for your not coming West with me. You must use your own judgment, but the longer I think of it, the meaner it seems to me for me to take advantage of your coming to me, last spring, and our getting married. I've thought about it a great deal. Nothing will ever make me like, or respect, the man you say you care for. I don't believe you do care for him. And I would rather see you dead than married to him. But it isn't for me to say, of course. If you like him, that's enough. If you ever stop liking him, and will come back to me, I'll meet you anywhere, or take you anywhere—it won't make any difference what Mother thinks, or Rose thinks, or any one else. I've written and destroyed this letter about six times. I just want you to know that if you think I am standing in the way of your happiness, I won't stand there, even though I believe you are making an awful mistake about that particular man. And I want to thank you for the happiest eight months that any man ever had.

Yours always,
WOLF.

Norma stood perfectly still, after she read the letter through, with the clutch of vague pain and shame at her heart. The stiff, stilted words did not seem like Wolf, and the definite casting-off hurt her. Why couldn't they be friends, at least? Granted that their marriage was a mistake, it had never had anything but harmony in it, companionship, mutual respect and understanding, and a happy intimacy as clean and natural as the meeting of flowers.

She was standing, motionless and silent, when Leslie's voice came clearly to her ears. Evidently Acton, Annie, and Leslie were alone, in Annie's room, out of sight, but not a dozen feet away from where she stood. Norma did not catch the exact words, but she caught her name, and her heart stood still with the instinctive

terror of the trapped. Annie had not heard either evidently; she said "What, dear?" sympathetically.

"I asked what's Norma doing here—isn't she overdoing her relationship a little?" Leslie said, languidly.

Norma's face burned, she could hardly breathe as she waited.

"Mama sent for her, for some reason," Annie answered, with a little drawl.

"After all, she's a sort of cousin, isn't she?" Acton added.

"Oh, don't jump on me for *everything* I say, Acton," Leslie said, angrily. "My *goodness*——!"

"Chris says that Mama left her the Melrose Building—and I don't know what besides!" Annie said. There was a moment of silence.

"I don't believe it! What for!" Leslie exclaimed, then, incredulously. And after another silence she added, in a puzzled tone, "Do *you* understand it, Aunt Annie?"

Evidently Annie answered with a glance or a shrug, for there was another pause before Annie said:

"What I don't like about it, and what I do wish Mama had thought of, is the way that people comment on a thing like that. It's not as if Norma needed it; she has a husband to take care of her, now, and it makes us a little ridiculous! One likes to feel that, at a time like this, everything is to be done decently, at least—not enormous legacies to comparative strangers——"

"I like Norma, we've all been kind to her," Leslie contributed, as Annie's voice died listlessly away. "I've always made allowances for her. But I confess that it was rather a surprise to find her here, one of the family——! After all, we Melroses have always rather

prided ourselves on standing together, haven't we? If she wants to wear black for Grandma, why, it makes no difference to *me*——"

"I suppose the will could be broken without any notoriety, Chris?" Annie asked, in an undertone. Norma's heart turned sick. She had not supposed that Chris was listening without protest to this conversation.

"No," she heard him say, briefly and definitely, "that's impossible!"

"It isn't the money——" Annie began. But Leslie interrupted with a bitter little laugh.

"It may not be with you, Aunt Annie, but I assure you I wouldn't mind a few extra thousands," she said.

"I think you get the Newport house, Leslie," Chris said, in a tone whose dubiety only Norma could understand.

"The Newport house!" Leslie exclaimed. "Why, but don't I own *this*, now? I thought——"

"I don't really know," Chris answered. "We'll open the will next week, and then we'll straighten everything out."

"In the meanwhile," Annie said, lazily, "if she suggests going back to her own family, for Heaven's sake don't stop her! I like Norma—always have. But after all, there are times when *any* outsider—no matter how agreeable she is——"

"I think she'll go immediately after the funeral," Chris said, constrainedly and uncertainly.

Norma, suddenly roused both to a realization of the utter impropriety of her overhearing all this, and the danger of detection, slipped from the dressing-room by the hall door, and so escaped to her own room.

She shut the door behind her, walked irresolutely to

the bed, stood there for a moment, with her hands pressed to her cheeks, walked blindly to the window, only to pause again, paced the room mechanically for a few minutes, and finally found herself seated on the broad, old-fashioned sill of the dressing-room window, staring down unseeing at the afternoon traffic in Madison Avenue.

Oh, how she hated them—cruel, selfish, self-satisfied snobs—snobs—snobs that they were! Leslie—Leslie "making allowances for her!" Leslie making allowances for *her!* And Annie—hoping that for Heaven's sake nobody would prevent her from going home after the funeral! The remembered phrases burned and stung like acid upon her soul; she wanted to hurt Annie and Leslie as they had hurt her, she wanted to shame them and anger them.

Yes, and she could do it, too! She could do it! They little knew that within a few days' time utter consternation and upheaval, notoriety and shame, and the pity of their intimates, would disrupt the surface of their lives, that surface that they felt it so important to keep smooth! "People will comment," Norma quoted to herself, with a bitter smile—indeed people would comment, as they had never commented even upon the Melroses before! Leslie would be robbed not only of her inheritance but of her name and of her position. And Annie—even magnificent Aunt Annie must accept, with what surface veneer of cordiality she might affect, the only child of her only brother, the heir to the family estate.

"I believe I'm horribly tired," Norma said to herself, looking out into the dimming winter day, "or else I'm nervous, or something! I wish I could go over to Rose's

and help her put the children to bed——! Or I wish Aunt Kate would telephone for me—I'm sick of this place! Or I wish Wolf would come walking around that corner—oh, if he would—if he would——!" Norma said, staring out with an intensity so great that it seemed to her for the moment that Wolf indeed might come. "If only he'd come to take me to dinner, at some little Italian place with a backyard, and skyscrapers all about, so that we could talk!"

Regina, coming in a little later, saw that Mrs. Sheridan had been crying, and reproached her with the affectionate familiarity of an old servitor.

"You that were always so light-hearted, Miss, it don't seem right for you to grieve so!" said Regina, a little tearful herself. Norma smiled, and wiped her eyes.

"This is a nice beginning," the girl told herself, as she bathed and dressed for the evening ordeal of calls, and messages, and solemn visits to the chamber of death, "this is a nice beginning for a woman who knows that the man she loves is free to marry her, and who has just fallen heir to a great fortune!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

The evening moved through its dark and sombre hours unchanged; Joseph's assistants opened and opened and opened the door. More flowers—more flowers—and more. Notes, telephone messages, black-clad callers murmuring in the dimness of the lower hall, maids coming noiselessly and deferentially, the clergyman, the doctor, the choir-master, old Judge Lee tremulous and tedious, all her world circled about the lifeless form of the old mistress of the house. Certain persons went quietly upstairs, women in rich furs, and bare-headed, uncomfortable-looking men, entered the front room, and passed through with serious faces and slowly shaking heads.

Chris spoke to Norma in the hall, just after she had said good-night to some rather important callers, assuring them that Annie and Leslie were well, and had been kissed herself as their representative. He extended her a crushed document in which she was alarmed to recognize Wolf's letter.

"Oh—I think I dropped that in Aunt Annie's dressing-room!" Norma said, turning scarlet, and wondering what eyes had seen it.

"There was no envelope; a maid brought it to her, and Annie read it," Chris said. Norma's eyes were racing through it.

"There are no names!" she said, thankfully.

"It would have been a most unfortunate—a—a

horrible thing, if there had been," Chris commented. Something in his manner said as plainly as words that dropping the letter had been a breach of good manners, had been extremely careless, almost reprehensible. Norma felt herself unreasonably antagonized.

"Oh, I don't know! It's true," she said, recklessly.

"Annie is a very important person in your plans, Norma," Chris reminded her. "It would be most regrettable for you to lose your head now, to give everyone an opportunity of criticizing you. I should advise you to enlist your Aunt Annie's sympathies just as soon as you can. She is, of all the world, the one woman who can direct you—help you equip yourself—tell you what to get, and how to establish yourself. If Annie chose to be unfriendly, to ignore you——"

"I don't see Annie von Behrens ignoring me—now!" Norma said, with anger, and throwing her head back proudly. They were in a curtained alcove on the landing of the angled stairway, completely hidden by the great curtain and by potted palms. "When my revered aunt realizes——"

"Your money will have absolutely no effect on Annie," Chris said, quickly.

"No, but what I *am* will!" Norma answered, breathing hard.

"Not while we keep it to ourselves, as of course we must," Chris answered, in displeasure. "No one but ourselves will ever know——"

"The whole world will know!" Norma said, in sudden impatience with smoothing and hiding and pretending. Chris straightened his eyeglasses on their ribbon, and gave her his scrutinizing, unruffled glance.

"That would be foolish, I think, Norma!" he told her,

calmly. "It would be a most unnecessary piece of vulgarity. Old families are constantly hushing up unfortunate chapters in their history; there is no reason why the whole thing should not be kept an absolute secret. My dear girl, you have just had a most extraordinary piece of good fortune—but you must be very careful how you take it! You will be—you are—a tremendously wealthy woman—and you will be in the public eye. Upon how you conduct yourself now your future position largely depends. Annie can—and I believe will—gladly assist you. Acton and Leslie will go abroad, I suppose—they can't live here. But a breath of scandal—or an ill-advised slip on your part—would make us all ridiculous. You must play your cards carefully. If you could stay with Annie, now——"

"I *hate* Aunt Annie!" Norma interrupted, childishly.

"My dear girl—you're over-tired, you don't mean what you say!" Chris said, putting his hand on her arm. Under the light touch she dropped her eyes, and stood still. "Norma, do be advised by me in this," he urged her earnestly. "It is one of the most important crises in your life. Annie can put you exactly where you want to be, introduced and accepted everywhere—a constant guest in her house, in her opera box, or Annie can drop you—I've seen her do it!—and it would take you ten years to make up the lost ground!"

"It didn't take Annie ten years to be a—a—social leader!" Norma argued, resentfully.

"Annie? Ah, my dear, a woman like Annie isn't born twice in a hundred years! She has—but you know what she has, Norma. Languages, experiences, friends—most of all she has the grand manner—the *belle aire*."

Norma was fighting to regain her composure over almost unbearable hurt and chagrin.

"But, Chris," she argued, desperately, "you've always said that you had no particular use for Annie's crowd—that you'd rather live in some little Italian place—or travel slowly through India——"

"I said I would like to do that, and so I would!" he answered. "But believe me, Norma, your money makes a very different sort of thing possible now, and you would be mad—you would be *mad!*—to throw it away. Put yourself in Annie's hands," he finished, with the first hint of his old manner that she had seen for forty-eight hours, "and have your car, your maids, your little establishment on the upper East Side, and then—then"— and now his arm was about her, and he had tipped up her face close to his own—"and then you and I will break our little surprise to them!" he said, kindly. "Only be careful, Norma. Don't let them say that you did anything ostentatious or conspicuous——"

She freed herself, her heart cold and desolate almost beyond bearing, and Chris answered her as if she had spoken.

"Yes—and I must go, too! To-morrow will be a terrible day for us all. Oh, one thing more, Norma! Annie asked me if I had any idea of who the man was—the man Wolf speaks of there in that note—and I had to say someone, just to quiet her. So I said that I thought it was Roy Gillespie—you don't mind?—I knew he liked you tremendously, and I happened to think of him! Is that all right?"

She made no audible answer, almost immediately leaving him, and going upstairs. There was nothing to do, in her room, and she knew that she could really be

of use downstairs, among the intimate old friends who were protecting Annie and Leslie from annoyance, but she felt in no mood for that. She hated herself and everybody; she was half-mad with fatigue and despondency.

Oh, what was the use of living—what was the use of living! Chris despised her; that was quite plain. He had advised her to-night as he would have advised an ignorant servant—an inexperienced commoner who might make the family ridiculous—who might lose her head, and descend to "unnecessary pieces of vulgarity!" Leslie had always "made allowances for Norma"; Annie considered her an "outsider." Wolf was going to California without her, and even Aunt Kate—even Aunt Kate had scolded her, reminded her that the Melroses had always been kind to her!

Norma's tears flowed fast, there seemed to be no end to the flood. She sopped them away with the black-bordered handkerchief, and tried walking about, and drinking cold water, but it was of no use. Her heart seemed broken, there was no avenue for her thoughts that did not lead to loneliness and grief. They had all pretended to love her—but not one of them did—not one of them did! She had never had a father, and never had a mother, she had never had a fair chance!

Money—she thought darkly. But what was the use of money if everyone hated her, if everyone thought she was selfish and stupid and ignorant and superfluous! Why find a beautiful apartment, and buy beautiful clothes, if she must flatter and cajole her way into Annie's favour to enjoy them, and bear Chris's superior disdain for her stumbling literary criticisms and her amateurish Italian?

And she was furious at Chris. How dared he—how dared he insult her by coupling her name with that of Roy Gillespie, to quiet Annie and to protect himself! She was a married woman; she had never given him any reason to take such liberties with her dignity! Roy Gillespie, indeed! Annie was to amuse herself by fancying Norma secretly enamoured of that big, stupid, simple Gillespie boy, who was twenty-two years old, and hardly out of college! And it was for him that Norma was presumably leaving her husband!

It was insufferable. It was insufferable. She would go straight to Annie—but no, she couldn't do that. She couldn't tell Annie, on the night before Annie's sister was buried, that that same sister's husband loved and was beloved by another woman.

"Still, it's true," Norma mused, darkly. "Only we seem unable to speak the truth in this house! Well, I'm stifling here——"

She had been leaning out of the open window, the night was soft and warm. Norma looked at her wrist-watch; it was nine o'clock. A sudden mad impulse took her: she would go over to Jersey, and see Rose. It was not so very late, the babies kept Rose and Harry up until almost eleven. She thirsted suddenly for Rose, for Rose's beautiful, pure little face, her puzzled, earnest blue eyes under black eyebrows, her pleasant, unready words that were always so true and so kind.

Rapidly Norma buttoned the new black coat, dropped the filmy veil, fled down the back stairway, and through a bright, hot pantry, where maids were laughing and eating gaily. She explained to their horrified silence that she was slipping out for a breath of air,

went through doorways and gratings, and found herself in the blessed coolness and darkness of the side street.

Ah—this was delicious! She belonged here, flying along inconspicuous and unmolested in light and darkness, just one of the hurrying and indifferent millions. The shop windows, the subways, the very gum-machines and the chestnut ovens with their blowing lamps looked friendly to Norma to-night; she loved every detail of blowing newspapers and yawning fellow-passengers, in the hot, bright tube.

On the other side she was hurrying off the train with the plunging crowd when her heart jumped wildly at the sight of a familiar shabby overcoat some fifty feet ahead of her, topped by the slightly tipped slouch hat that Wolf always wore. Friday night! her thoughts flashed joyously, and he was coming to New Jersey to see his mother and Rose! Of all fortunate accidents —the one person in the world she wanted to see—and must see now!

Norma fled after the coat, dodging and slipping through every opening, and keeping the rapidly moving slouch hat before her. She was quite out of breath when she came abreast of the man, and saw, with a sickening revulsion, that it was not Wolf.

What the man thought Norma never knew or cared. The surprising blankness of the disappointment made her almost dizzy; she turned aside blindly, and stumbled into the quiet backwater behind a stairway, where she could recover her self-possession and endure unobserved the first pangs of bitterness. It seemed to her that she would die if she could not see Wolf, if she had to endure another minute of loneliness and darkness and aimless wandering through the night.

Rose's house was only three well-lighted blocks from the station; Norma almost ran them. Other houses, she noted, were still brightly lighted at quarter to eleven o'clock, and Rose's might be. Aunt Kate was there, and she and Rose might well be sitting up, with the restless smaller baby, or to finish some bit of sewing.

It was a double house, and the windows that matched Rose's bedroom and dining-room were lighted in the wrong half. But all Rose's side was black and dark and silent.

Norma, for the first time in her life, needed courage for the knocking and ringing and explaining. If they would surely be kind to her, she might chance it, she thought. But if Aunt Kate was angry with her vacillations in regard to Wolf, and if Rose had also taken Wolf's side, then she knew that she, Norma, would begin to cry, and disgrace herself, and have good-natured simple old Harry poking about and wondering what was the matter——

No, she didn't dare risk it. So she waited in the little garden, looking up at the windows, praying that little Harry would wake up, or that the baby's little acid wail would drift through the open window, and then the dim light bloom suddenly, and show a silhouette of Rose, tall and sweet in her wrapper, with a great rope of braid falling over one shoulder.

But moments went by, and there was no sound. Norma went to the street lamp a hundred feet away and looked at her wrist watch. Quarter past eleven; it was useless to wait any longer; it had been a senseless quest from the beginning.

She went back to the city by train and boat, crying desolately in the darkness above the ploughing of the

invisible waters. She cried with pity for herself, for it seemed to her that life was very unfair to her.

"Is it *my* fault that I inherit all that money?" she asked the dark night angrily. "Is it my fault that I love Chris Liggett? Isn't it better to be honest about it than live with a man I don't love? Isn't that the worst thing that woman can endure—a loveless marriage?

"But that's just the High School Debating Society!" she interrupted herself, suddenly, using a phrase that she and Wolf had coined long ago for glib argument that is untouched by actual knowledge of life. "Loveless marriage—and wife in name only! I wonder if I am getting to be one of the women who throw those terms about as an excuse for just sheer selfishness and stupidity!"

And her aunt's phrases came back to her, making her wonder unhappily just where the trouble lay, just what sort of a woman she was.

"I think you will be whatever you want to be, Norma," Mrs. Sheridan had said, "you're a woman now—you're Wolf's wife——"

But that was just what she did not feel herself, a woman and Wolf's wife. She was a girl—interested in shaggy sport coats and lace stockings; she did not want to be any one's wife! She wanted to punish Leslie and Aunt Annie, and to have plenty of money, and to have a wonderful little apartment on the east side of the Park, and delicious clothes; she wanted to become a well-known figure in New York society, at Palm Beach and the summer resorts, and at the opera and the big dining-rooms of the hotels.

"And I could do it, too!" Norma thought, walking

through the cool, dark night restlessly. "In two years—in three or four, anyway, I would be where Aunt Annie is; or at least I would if Chris and I were married —he could do anything! I suppose," she added, with youthful recklessness, "I suppose there are lots of old fogies who would never understand my getting separated from Wolf, but it isn't as if *he* didn't understand, for I know he does! Wolf has always known that it took just *certain things* to make me happy!"

Something petty, and contemptible, and unworthy, in this last argument smote her ears unpleasantly, and she was conscious of flushing in the dark.

"Well, people have to be happy, don't they?" she reasoned, with a rising inflection at the end of the phrase that surprised and a trifle disquieted her. "Don't they?" she asked herself, thoughtfully, as she crept in at the side door of the magnificent, cumbersome old house that was her own now. No one but an amazed-looking maid saw her, as she regained her room, and fifteen minutes later she was circulating about the dim and mournful upper floor again. Annie called her into her room.

"You look fearfully tired, Norma! Do get some sleep," her aunt said, with unusual kindness. "I'm going to try to, although my head is aching terribly, and I know I can't. To-morrow will be hard on us all. I shall go home to-morrow night, and I'm trying to persuade Leslie to come with me."

"No, I shan't! I'm going to stay here," Leslie said, with a sort of weary pettishness. "My house is closed, and poor Chris is going to begin closing Aunt Alice's house, and he doesn't want to go to a club—he'd much rather be here, wouldn't he, Norma?"

Something in the tired way that both aunt and niece appealed to her touched Norma, and she answered sympathetically:

"Truly, I think he would, Aunt Annie. And if little Patricia and the nurse get here on Sunday, she won't be lonely."

"Norma, why don't you stay here, too—your husband's in Philadelphia," Leslie asked her. "Do! We shall have so much to do——"

"We haven't seen the will, but I believe Judge Lee is going to bring it on Wednesday," Annie said, "and Chris said that Mama left you—well, I don't know what! I wish you could arrange to stay the rest of the week, at least!"

"I will!" Norma agreed. She had been feeling neglected and lonely, and this unexpected friendliness was heartwarming.

"You've been a real comfort," Annie said, good-naturedly. "You're such a sensible child, Norma. I hope one of these days—afterward"—and Annie faintly indicated with her eyebrows the direction of the front room from which the funeral procession would start to-morrow—"afterward, that you'll let us know your husband better. And now it's long past midnight, girls, and you ought to be in bed!"

It was mere casual civility on Annie's part, as accidental as had been her casual unkindness a few hours before. But it lifted Norma's heart, and she went out into the hall in a softer frame of mind than she had known for a long time. She managed another word with Chris before going to her room for almost nine hours of reviving and restoring sleep.

"Chris, I feel terribly about breaking this news to

Aunt Annie and Leslie while they feel so badly about Aunt Alice and Aunt Marianna!" she said. Again Chris gave the hallway, where she had met him, a quick, uneasy scrutiny before he answered her:

"Well, of course! But it can't be helped."

"But do you think that we could put it off until Wednesday, Chris, when the will is to be read? Everyone will be here then, and it would seem a good time to do it!"

"Yes," he consented, after a moment's thought, "I think that is a good idea!" And so they left it.

CHAPTER XXXIV

REGINA roused Norma just in time for the long, wearisome ceremonials of the following day, a cold, bright gusty day, when the wet streets flashed back sombre reflections of the motor wheels, and the newly turned earth oozed flashing drops of water. The cortège left the old Melrose house at ten minutes before ten o'clock, and it was four before the tired, headachy, cramped members of the immediate family group regathered there, to discard the crape-smothered hats, and the odorous, sombre furs, and to talk quietly together as they sipped hot soup and crumbled rolls. Everything had been changed, the flowers were gone, furniture was back in place, and the upper front room had been opened widely to the suddenly spring-like afternoon. There was not a fallen violet petal to remind her descendants that the old mistress of forty full years was gone for ever.

Annie's boys came to bring Mother home, after so many strange days' absence, and Norma liked the way that Annie smiled wearily at Hendrick, and pressed her white face hungrily against the boys' blonde, firm little faces. Leslie, in an unwontedly tender mood, drew Acton's arm about her, as she sat in a big chair, and told him with watering eyes that she would be glad to see old Patsie-baby on Sunday. Norma sat alone, the carved Tudor oak rising high above her little tired head with its crushed soft hair, and Chris sat alone,

too, at the other end of the table, and somehow, in the soul fatigue that was worse than any bodily fatigue, she did not want the distance between them bridged, she did not want—she shuddered away from the word—love-making from Chris again!

Leslie, who felt quite ill with strain and sorrow, went upstairs to bed, the Von Behrens went away, and presently Acton disappeared, to telephone old Doctor Murray that his wife would like a sedative—or a heart stimulant, or some other little attention as a recognition of her broken state.

Then Chris and Norma were alone, and with a quiet dignity that surprised him she beckoned him to the chair next to her, and, leaning both elbows on the cloth, fixed him with her beautiful, tired eyes.

"I want to talk to you, Chris, and this seems to be the time!" she said. "You'll be deep in all sorts of horrible things for weeks now, poor old Chris, and I want this said first! I've been thinking very seriously all these days—they seem months—since Aunt Marianna died, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm—well, I'm a fool!"

She said the last word so unexpectedly, with such obvious surprise, that Chris's tired, colourless face broke into something like a smile. He had seated himself next to her, and was evidently bending upon her problem his most earnest attention.

"Some months ago," Norma said in a low voice, "I thought—I *thought*—that I fell in love! The man was rich, and handsome, and clever, and he knew more—of certain things!—in his little finger, than I shall ever know in my whole life. Not exactly more French, or more of politics, or more persons—I don't mean

quite that. But I mean a conglomerate sort of—I'm expressing myself badly, but you understand—a conglomerate total of all these things that make him an aristocrat! That's what he is, an aristocrat. Now, I'm not! I've found that out. I'm different."

"Nonsense!" Chris said, lightly, but listening patiently none the less.

"I know," Norma resumed, hammering her thought out slowly, and frowning down at the teaspoon that she was measuring between her finger-tips, "I know that there are two women in me. One is the Melrose, who *could*—for I know I could!—push her husband out of sight, take up the whole business of doing things correctly, from hair-dressing and writing notes of condolence to being"—she could manage a hint of a smile under swiftly raised lashes—"being presented at Saint James's!" she said. "In five years she would be an admired and correct and popular woman, and perhaps even married to this man I speak of! The other woman is my little plain French mother's sort—who was a servant—my Aunt Kate's kind," and Norma suddenly felt the tears in her eyes, and winked them away with an April smile, "who belongs to her husband, who likes to cook and tramp about in the woods, and send Christmas boxes to Rose's babies, and—and go to movies, and picnics! And that's the sort of woman I *am*, Chris," Norma ended, with a sudden firmness, and even a certain relief in her voice. "I've just discovered it! I've been spoiled all my life—I've been loved too much, I think, but I've thought it all out—it really came to me, as I stood beside Aunt Marianna's grave to-day, and you don't know how happy it's made me!"

"You are talking very recklessly, Norma," Chris said, as she paused, in his quiet, definite voice. "You are over-excited now. There is no such difference in the two—the two classes, to call them that, as you fancy! The richer people, the people who, as you say, do things correctly, and are presented at Saint James's, have all the simple pleasures, too. One likes moving pictures now and then; I'm sure we often have picnics in the summer. But there are women in New York—hundreds of them, who would give the last twenty years of their lives to step into exactly what you can take for the asking now. You will have Annie and me back of you—this isn't the time, Norma, for me to say just how entirely you will have my championship! But surely you know——"

He was just what he had always been: self-possessed, finished, splendidly sure in voice and manner. He was rich, he was popular, he was a dictator in his quiet way. And she knew even if the shock of his wife's sudden going had pushed his thought of her into the background, that in a few months he would be hovering about her again, conventionally freed for conventional devotion.

She saw all this, and for the first time to-day she saw other things, too. That he was forty, and looked it. That there was just the faintest suggestion of thinning in his smooth hair, where Wolf's magnificent mane was the thickest. That it was just a little bloodless, this decorous mourning that had so instantly engulfed him, who had actually told her, another man's wife, a few weeks before, that his own wife was dying, and so would free him for the woman he loved at last!

In short, Norma mused, watching him as he fell into

moody silence, he had not scrupled to break the spirit of his bond to Alice, he had not hesitated to tell Norma that he loved her when only Norma, and possibly Alice, might suffer from his disloyalty. But when the sacred letter was touched, the sacred outside of the vessel that must be kept clean before the world, then Chris was instantly the impeccable, the irreproachable man of his caste again. It was all part of the superficial smallness of that world where arbitrary form ruled, where to send a wedding invitation printed and not engraved, or to mispronounce the name of a visiting Italian tenor or Russian dancer, would mark the noblest woman in the world as hopelessly "not belonging."

"One of the things you do that really you oughtn't to, Norma," he resumed, presently, in quiet distaste, "is assume that there is some mysterious difference between, say, the Craigies, and well—your husband. The Craigies are enormously wealthy, of course. That means that they have always had fine service, music, travel, the best of everything in educational ways, friendship with the best people—and those things *are* an advantage, generation after generation. It's absurd to deny that Annie's children, for example, haven't any real and tremendous advantages over—well, some child of a perfectly respectable family that manages nicely on ten thousand a year. But that Annie's pleasures are not as real, or that there must necessarily be something dangerous—something detestable—in the life of the best people, is ridiculous!"

"That's just what I do assert," she answered, bravely. "It may not be so for you, for you were born to it! But when you've lived, as I have, in a different sort

of life, with people to whom meals, and the rent, and their jobs, really matter—this sort of thing doesn't seem *real.* You feel like bursting out laughing and saying, 'Oh, get out! What's the difference if I *don't* make calls, and broaden my vowels, and wear just this and that, and say just this and that!' It all seems so *tame.*"

"Not at all," Chris said, really roused. "Take Betty Doane, now, the Craigies' cousin. There's nothing conventional about her. There's a girl who dresses like a man all summer, who ran away from school and tramped into Hungary dressed as a gipsy, who slapped Joe Brinckerhoff's face for him last winter, and who says that when she loves a man she's going off with him—no matter who he is, or whether he's married or not, or whether she is!"

"I'll tell you what she sounds like to me, Chris, a little saucy girl of about eight trying to see how naughty she can be! Why, that," said Norma, eagerly, "that's not *real.* That isn't like house-hunting when you know you can't pay more than thirty dollars' rent, or surprising your husband with a new thermos bottle that he didn't think he could afford!"

"Ah, well, if you *like* slums, of course!" Chris said, coldly. "But nothing can prevent your inheriting an enormous sum of money, Norma," he said, ending the conversation, "and in six months you'll feel very differently!"

"There is just one chance in ten—one chance in a hundred—that I might!" she said to herself, going upstairs, after Chris and Acton, who presently returned to the dining-room, had begun an undertoned conversation. And with a sudden flood of radiance and happi-

ness at her heart, she sat down at her desk, and wrote to Wolf.

The note said:

WOLF DEAR:

I have been thinking very seriously, during these serious days, and I am writing you more earnestly than I ever wrote any one in my life. I want you to forgive me all my foolishness, and let me come back to you. I have missed you so bitterly, and thought how good and how sensible you were, and how you took care of us all years ago, and gave Rose and me skates that Christmas that you didn't have your bicycle mended, and how we all sat up and cried the night Aunt Kate was sick, and you made us chocolate by the rule on the box. I have been very silly, and I thought I cared—and perhaps I *did* care—for somebody else; or at least I cared for what he stood for, but I am over that now, and I feel so much older, and as if I needed you so. I shall have a tremendous lot of money, and we'll just have to decide what to do with it, but I think I know now that there won't be any particular pleasure in spending it. We'll always love the old car, and—— But it just occurs to me that we *could* send poor Kitty Barry to the hospital, and perhaps ship them all off somewhere where they'd get better. Aunt Kate would like that. But won't you come up, Wolf, and see me? I'll meet you anywhere, and we can talk, on Monday or Tuesday. Will you write me or wire me? I can't wait to see you!

She cried over the letter, and over the signature that she was his loving Nono, but she mailed it with a dancing heart. The road had been dark and troubled for awhile, but it was all clear now! The wrong had been—the whole wretched trouble had been—in her thinking that she could toss aside the solemn oath that she had taken on the bewildering day of her marriage almost a year ago.

Never since old, old days of childhood, when she and Wolf and Rose had wiped the dishes and raked the yard, and walked a mile to the twenty-five-cent seats

at the circus, had Norma been so sure of herself, and so happy. She felt herself promoted, lifted above the old feelings and the old ways, and dedicated to the work before her. And one by one the shadows lifted, and the illusions blew away, and she could see her way clear for the first time in more than three years. It was all simple, all right, all just as she would have had it. She would never be a petted and wealthy little Leslie, she would never be a leader, like Mrs. von Behrens, and she would never stand before the world as the woman chosen by the incomparable Chris. Yet she was the last Melrose, and she knew now how she could prove herself the proudest of them all, how she could do these kinspeople of hers a greater favour than any they had ever dreamed of doing her. And in the richness of renouncing Norma knew herself to be for the first time truly rich.

Chris saw the difference in her next day, felt the new dignity, the sudden transition from girl to woman, but he had no inkling of its cause. Leslie saw it, and Annie, but Norma gave them no clue. At luncheon Annie, who had joined them for the meal, proposed that Leslie and Norma and the Liggetts come to her for a quiet family dinner, but Norma begged off; she really must see Aunt Kate, and would seize this opportunity to go home for a night. But leaving the table Norma asked Chris if she might talk business to him for a few minutes.

They sat in the old library, Chris sunk in a great leather chair, smoking cigarettes, Norma opposite, her white hands clasped on the blackness of her simple gown, and her eyes moving occasionally from their quiet study of the fire to rest on Chris's face.

"Chris," she said, "I've thought this all out, now, and I'm not really asking your advice, I'm telling you what I am going to do! I'm going to California with Wolf in a week or two—that's the first thing!"

He stared at her blankly, and as the minutes of silence between them lengthened Norma noticed his lips compress themselves into a thin, colourless line. But she returned his look bravely, and in her eyes there was something that told the man she was determined in her decision.

"I don't quite follow you, Norma," he said at last with difficulty. "You mean that all the plans and hopes we shared and discussed——" He faltered a moment and then made another effort: "Now that whatever obstacles there were have been removed, and you and I are free to fulfill our destinies, am I to understand that—that you are going back to your husband?"

"Exactly." The girl's answer was firm and determined.

The colour fled from Chris's face, and a cold light came into his eye; his jaw stiffened.

"You must use your own judgment, Norma," he answered, with a displeased shrug.

"I'll leave with you, or send you, my power of attorney," the girl went on, "and you and Hendrick as executors must do whatever you think right and just—just deposit the money in the bank!"

"I see," Chris said, noncommittally.

"And there's another thing," Norma went on, with heightened colour. "I don't want either Leslie or Aunt Annie ever to know—what you and I know!"

Chris looked at her, frowning slightly.

"That's impossible, of course," he said. "What are they going to think?"

"They'll think nothing," Norma said, confidently, but with anxious eyes fixed on his face, "because they'll know nothing. There'll be no change, nothing to make them suspect anything."

"But—great God! You don't seem to understand, Norma. Proofs of your birth, of your rightful heritage, your identity, the fact that you are Theodore's child, must be shown them, of course. You have inherited by Aunt Marianna's will the bulk of her personal fortune, but besides this, as Theodore's child, you inherit the Melrose estate, and Leslie must turn this all over to you, and make such restitution as she is able, of all income from it which she has received since Judge Lee and I turned it over to her on her eighteenth birthday."

"No, that's just what she is *not* to do! I will get exactly what is mentioned in the will—as Norma Sheridan, bonds and the Melrose Building, and so on," Norma broke in, eagerly. "And that's enough, goodness knows, and a thousand times more than Wolf and I ever expected to have. Aunt Annie and Leslie are reconciled to that. But for the rest, I refuse to accept it. I don't want it. I've never been so unhappy in my life as I've been in this house, for all the money and the good times and the beautiful clothes. And if that much didn't make me happy, why should ten times more? Isn't it far, far better—all round——"

"You are talking absurdities," said Chris. "Do you think that Hendrick and I could consent to this? Do you suppose——"

"Hendrick doesn't know it, Chris. It is only you and I and Aunt Kate—that's all! And if I do this, and

swear you and Aunt Kate to secrecy, who is responsible, except me?"

Chris shook his head. "Aunt Marianna wished you righted—wished you to take your place as Theodore's daughter. It is her wish, and it is only our duty——"

"But think a minute, Chris, think a minute," Norma said, eagerly, leaning forward in her chair, so that her locked hands almost touched his knees. "*Was* it her wish? She wanted me to *know*—that's certain! And I do know. But do you really think she wanted Leslie to be shamed and crushed, and to take away the money Leslie has had all her life, to shock Aunt Annie, and stir that old miserable matter up with Hendrick? Chris, you *can't* think that! The one thing she would have wished and prayed would have been that somehow the matter would have been righted without hurting any one. Chris, *think* before you tear the whole family up by the roots. What harm is there in this way? I have plenty of money—and I go away. The others go on just as they always have, and in a little way—in just a hundredth part—I pay back dear old Aunt Marianna for all the worrying and planning she did, to make up to me for what should have been mine, and was Leslie's. Please —*please*, help me to do this, Chris. I can't be happy any other way. Aunt Kate will approve—you don't know how much she will approve, and it will repay her, too, just a little, to feel that it's all known now, and that it has turned out this way. And she will destroy every last line and shred of letters and papers, and the photographs she said she had, and it will all be over—for ever and for ever!"

"You put a terrible responsibility upon me," Chris said, slowly.

"No—I take it myself!" Norma answered. He had gotten to his feet, and was standing at the hearth, and now she rose, too, and looked eagerly up at him. "It isn't anything like the responsibility of facing the world with the whole horrible story!"

Chris was silent, thinking. Presently he turned upon her the old smile that she had always found irresistible, and put his two hands on her shoulders.

"You are a wonderful woman, Norma!" he said, slowly. "What woman in the world, but you, would do that? Yes, I'll do it—for Leslie's sake, and Acton's sake, and because I believe Alice would think it as wonderful in you as I do. But think," Chris said, "think just a few days, Norma. You and I—you and I might go a long way, my dear!"

If he had said it even at this hour yesterday, he might have shaken her, for the voice was the voice of the old Chris, and she had been even then puzzled and confused to see the wisest way. But now everything was changed; he could not reach her now, even when he put his arm about her, and said that this was one of their rare last chances to be alone together, and asked if it must be good-bye.

She looked up at him gravely and unashamedly.

"Yes, it must be good-bye—dear Chris!" she said, with a little emotion. "Although I hope we will see each other often, if ever Wolf and I come back. Engineers live in Canada and Panama and India and Alaska, you know, and we never will know we are coming until we get here! And I'm not going to try to thank you, Chris, for what you did for an ignorant, silly, strange little girl; you've been a big brother to me all these last years! And something more, of course,"

Norma added, bravely, "and I won't say—I can't say —that if it hadn't been for Wolf, and all the changes this year—changes in me, too—I wouldn't have loved you all my life. But there's no place that you could take me, as Wolf Sheridan's divorced wife, that would seem worth while to me, when I got there—not if it was in the peerage!"

"There's just one thing that I want to say, too, Norma," Chris said, suddenly, when she had finished. "I'm not good enough for you; I know it. I see myself as I am, sometimes, I suppose. I think you're going to be happy—and God knows I hope so; perhaps it *is* a realer life, your husband's: and perhaps a man who works for his wife with his hands and his head has got something on us other fellows after all! I've often wished—— But that doesn't matter now. But I want you to know I'll always remember you as the finest woman I ever knew—just the best there is! And if ever I've hurt you, forgive me, won't you, Norma?—and—and let me kiss you good-bye!"

She raised her face to his confidently, and her eyes were misty when she went upstairs, because she had seen that his were wet. But there was no more unhappiness; indeed an overwhelming sense that everything was right —that every life had shifted back into normal and manageable and infinitely better lines, went with her as she walked slowly out into the sunshine, and wandered in the general direction of Aunt Kate's. As she left the old Melrose home, the big limousine was standing at the door, and presently Annie and Leslie would sweep out in their flowing veils and crapes, and whirl off to the Von Behrens mansion. But Norma Sheridan was content to walk to the omnibus, and to take the

jolting front seat, and to look down in all brotherly love and companionship at the moving and shifting crowds that were glorying in the warm spring weather.

To be busy—to be needed—to be loved—she said to herself. That was the sweet of life, and it could not be taken from the policeman at the crossing or the humblest little shop-girl who scampered under his big arm, or bought by the bored women in limousines who, furred and flowered and feathered, were moving from the matinée to the tea table. Caroline Craigie, Aunt Annie, Leslie; she had seen the material advantages of life fail them all.

CHAPTER XXXV

Aunt Kate was out when Norma reached the apartment, but she knew that the key was always on the top of the door frame, and entered the familiar old rooms without any trouble. But she saw in a dismayed flash that Aunt Kate was not coming back, for that night at least. The kitchen window had been left four inches open, to accommodate the cat, milk and bones were laid in waiting, and a note in the bottle notified the milkman "no milk until to-morrow." There was also a note in pencil, on the bottom of an egg-box, for the nurses who rented two rooms, should either one of them chance to come in and be hungry, she was to eat "the pudding and the chicken stew, and get herself a good supper."

Norma, chuckling a little, got herself the good supper instead. It was with a delightful sense of solitude and irresponsibility that she sat eating it, at the only window in the flat that possessed a good view, the kitchen window. Aunt Kate, she decided, was with Rose, who had no telephone; Norma thought that she would wait until Aunt Kate got home the next day, rather than chance the long trip to the Oranges again. An alternative would have been to go to Aunt Annie's house, but somehow the thought of the big, silent handsome place, with the men in evening wear, Aunt Annie and Leslie in just the correct mourning décolleté, and the conversation decorously funereal, did not appeal to her. Instead it seemed a real adventure to dine alone, and after dinner

to put on a less conspicuous hat and coat, and slip out into the streets, and walk about in her new-found freedom.

The night was soft and balmy, and the sidewalks filled with sauntering groups enjoying the first delicious promise of summer as much as Norma did. The winter had been long and cold and snowy; great masses of thawing ice from far-away rivers were slowly drifting down the star-lighted surface of the Hudson, and the trees were still bare. But the air was warm, and the breezes lifted and stirred the tender darkness above her head with a summery sweetness.

Norma loved all the world to-night; the work-tired world that was revelling in idleness and fresh air. Romance seemed all about her, the doorways into which children reluctantly vanished, the gossiping women coming back from bakery or market, the candy stores flooded with light, and crowded with young people who were having the brightest and most thrilling moments of all their lives over banana specials and chocolate sundaes. The usual whirlpools eddied about the subway openings and moving-picture houses, the usual lovers locked arms, in the high rocking darkness of the omnibus tops, and looked down in apathetic indifference upon the disappointment of other lovers at the crossings. In the bright windows of dairy restaurants grapefruit were piled, and big baked apples ranged in saucers, and beyond there were hungry men leaning far over the table while they discussed doughnuts and strong coffee, and shook open evening papers.

She and Wolf had studied it all for years; it was sordid and crowded and cheap, perhaps, but it was honest and happy, too, and it was real. There was no affectation

here, even the premature spring hats, and the rouge, and the high heels were an ingenuous bid for just a little notice, just a little admiration, just a little longer youth.

Sauntering along in the very heart of it, hearing the flirtation, the theatrical chatter, the homely gossip about her, Norma knew that she was at home. Leslie, perhaps, might have loathed it had she been put down in the midst of it; to Aunt Annie it would always seem entirely beneath even contempt. But Norma realized to-night, as she slipped into church for a few minutes, as she dropped a coin into a beggar's tin cup, as she entered into casual conversation with the angry mother of a defiant boy, that this, to her, was life. It was life—to work, to plan, to marry and bear children, to wrest her own home from unfavourable conditions, and help her own man to win. She would live, because she would care—care deeply how Wolf fared in his work, how her house prospered, how her children developed. She would not be Aunt Annie's sort of woman—Chris's sort—she would be herself, judged not by what she had, but by what she could do—what she could give.

"And that's the kind of woman I am, after all," she said to herself, rejoicingly. "The child of a French maid and a spoiled, rich young man! But no, I'm not their child. I'm Aunt Kate's—just as much as Rose and Wolf are——!" And at the thought of Wolf she smiled. "Won't Wolf Sheridan *open his eyes?*"

When she reached Forty-first Street she turned east, and went past the familiar door of the opera house. It was a special performance, and the waiting line stretched from the box office down the street, and around the corner, into the dark. They would only be able to buy

standing room, these patient happy music lovers who grew weary and cold waiting for their treat, and even standing, they would be behind an immovable crowd, they would catch only occasional glimpses of the stage. But Norma told herself that she would rather be in that line, than yawningly deciding, as she had so often seen Annie decide, that she would perhaps rustle into the box at ten o'clock for the third act—although it was rather a bore.

She flitted near enough to see the general stir, and to see once more the sign "No Footmen Allowed in This Lobby," and then, smiling at the old memories, she slipped away into the darkness, drinking in insatiably the intimate friendliness of the big city and the spring night.

CHAPTER XXXVI

It was ten o'clock the next day, a silent gray day, when Aunt Kate let herself into the apartment, and "let out," to use her own phrase, a startled exclamation at finding her young daughter-in-law deeply asleep in her bed. Norma, a vision of cloudy dark tumbled hair and beautiful sleepy blue eyes, half-strangled the older woman in a rapturous embrace, and explained that she had come home the night before, and eaten the chicken stew, and perhaps overslept—at any rate would love some coffee.

Something faintly shadowed in her aunt's welcome, however, was immediately apparent, and Norma asked, with a trace of anxiety, if Rose's babies were well. For answer her aunt merely asked if Wolf had telephoned.

"Wolf!" said Wolf's wife. "Is he home?"

"My dear," Mrs. Sheridan said. "He's going—he's gone!—to California!"

Norma did not move. But the colour went out of her face, and the brightness from her eyes.

"Gone!" she whispered.

"Well—he goes to-day! At six o'clock——"

"At six o'clock!" Norma leaped from her bed, stood with clenched hands and wild eyes, thinking, in the middle of the floor. "It's twenty-two minutes past ten," she breathed. "Where does he leave?"

"Rose and I were to see him at the Grand Central at quarter past five," his mother began, catching the con-

tagious excitement. "But, darling, I don't know where you can get him before that!—Here, let me do that," she added, for Norma had dashed into the kitchen, and was measuring coffee recklessly. A brown stream trickled to the floor.

"Oh, Lord—Lord—help me to get hold of him somewhere!" she heard Norma breathe. "And you weren't going to let me know—but it's my fault," she said, putting her hands over her face, and rocking to and fro in desperate suspense. "Oh, how can I get him?—I must! Oh, Aunt Kate—*help me!* Oh, I'm not even dressed—and that clock says half-past ten! Aunt Kate, will you help me!"

"Norma, my darling," her aunt said, arresting the whirling little figure with a big arm, and looking down at her with all the love and sadness of her great heart in her face, "why do you want to see him, dear? He told me—he had to tell his mother, poor boy, for his heart is broken—that you were not going with him!"

"Oh, but Aunt Kate—he'll have to wait for me!" Norma said, stamping a slippered foot, and beginning to cry with hurt and helplessness. "Oh, won't you help me? You always help me! Don't—don't mind what I said to Wolf; you know how silly I am! But please—*please*——"

"But, Baby—you're sure?" Mrs. Sheridan asked, feeling as if ice that had been packed about her heart for days was breaking and stirring, and as if the exquisite pain of it would kill her. "Don't—hurt him again, Norma!"

"But he's going off—without me," Norma wailed, rushing to the bathroom, and pinning her magnificent mass of soft dark hair into a stern knob for her bath. "Aunt Kate, I've always loved Wolf, always!" she said,

passionately. "And if he really had gone away without me I think it would have broken my heart! You *know* how I love him! We'll catch him somewhere, I know we will! We'll telephone—or else Harry——"

She trailed into the kitchen half-dressed, ten minutes later.

"I've telephoned for a taxi, Aunt Kate, and we'll find him somewhere," she said, gulping hot coffee appreciatively. "I must—I've something to tell him. But I'll have to tell you everything in the cab. To begin with—it's all over. I'm done with the Melroses. I appreciate all they did for me, and I appreciate your worrying and planning about that old secret. But I've made up my mind. Whatever you have of letters, and papers and proofs, I want you please to do the family a last favour by burning—every last shred. I've told Chris, I won't touch a cent of the money, except what Aunt Marianna left me; and I never, never, never intend to say one more word on the subject! Thousands didn't make me happy, so why should a million? The best thing my father ever did for me was to give my mother a chance to bring me here to you!"

She had gotten into her aunt's lap as she spoke, and was rubbing her cheek against the older, roughened cheek, and punctuating her conversation with little kisses. Mrs. Sheridan looked at her, and blinked, and seemed to find nothing to say.

"Perhaps some day when it's hot—and the jelly doesn't jell—and the children break the fence," pursued Norma, "I will be sorry! I haven't much sense, and I may feel that I've been a fool. But then I just want you to remind me of Leslie—and the Craigies—or better, of what a beast I am myself in that atmosphere! So

it's all over, Aunt Kate, and if Wolf will forgive me—and he always does——"

"He's bitterly hurt this time, Nono," said her aunt, gently.

Norma looked a little anxious.

"I wrote him in Philadelphia," she said, "but he won't get that letter. Oh, Aunt Kate—if we don't find him! But we will—if I have to walk up to him in the station the last minute—and stop him——"

"Ah, Norma, you love him!" his mother said, in a great burst of thankfulness. "And may God be thanked for all His goodness! That's all I care about—that you love him, and that you two will be together again. We'll get hold of him, dear, somehow——!"

"But, my darling," she added, coming presently to the bedroom door to see the dashing little feathered hat go on, and the dotted veil pinned with exquisite nicety over Norma's glowing face, and the belted brown coat and loose brown fur rapidly assumed, "you're not wearing your mourning!"

"Not to-day," Norma said, abstractedly. And aloud she read a list:

"Bank; Grand Central; drawing-room; new suit-case; notary for power of attorney; Kitty Barry; telephone Chris, Leslie, Annie; telephone Regina about trunks. Can we be back here at say—four, Aunt Kate?"

"But what's all that for?" her aunt asked, dazedly.

Norma looked at a check book; put it in her coat pocket. Then as her aunt's question reached her preoccupied mind, she turned toward her with a puzzled expression.

"Why, Aunt Kate—you don't seem to understand; I'm going with Wolf to California this evening."

CHAPTER XXXVII

It was exactly nineteen minutes past five o'clock when Wolf Sheridan walked into the Grand Central Station that afternoon. He had stopped outside to send his wife some flowers, and just a brief line of farewell, and he was thinking so hard of Norma that it seemed natural that the woman who was coming toward him, in the great central concourse, should suggest her. The woman was pretty, too, and wore the sort of dashing little hat that Norma often wore, and there was something so familiar about the belted brown coat and the soft brown furs that Wolf's heart gave a great plunge, and began to ache—ache—ache—hopelessly again.

The brown coat came nearer—and nearer. And then he saw that the wearer was indeed his wife. She had dewy violets in her belt, and her violet eyes were dewy, too, and her face paled suddenly as she put her hand on his arm.

What Norma all that tired and panicky afternoon had planned to say to Wolf on this occasion was something like this:

"Wolf, if you ever loved me, and if I ever did anything that made you happy, and if all these years when I have been your little sister, and your chum, and your wife, mean anything to you—don't push me away now! I am sorrier for my foolishness, and more ashamed of it, than you can possibly be! I think it was never any-

thing but weakness and vanity that made me want to flirt with Chris Liggett. I think that if he had once stopped flattering me, and if ever our meetings had been anything but stolen fruit, as it were, I would have seen how utterly blind I was! I'm different now, Wolf; I know that what I felt for him was only shallow vanity, and that what I feel for you is the deepest and realest love that any woman ever knew! There's nothing—no minute of the day or night when I don't need you. There's nothing that you think that isn't what I think! I want to go West with you, and make a home there, and when you go to China, or go to India, I want you to go because your wife has helped you—because you have had happy years of working and experimenting and picnicking and planning—with me!

"It's all over, Wolf, that Melrose business—that dream! I've said good-bye to them, and they have to me, and they know I'm never coming back! I'm a Sheridan now—really and truly—for ever."

And in the lonesome and bitter days in which his great dream had come true, without Norma to share it, days in which he had been thinking of her as affiliated more and more with the element he despised, identified more and more with the man who had wrecked—or tried to wreck—her life, Wolf had imagined this meeting, and imagined her as tentatively holding out the olive branch of peace; and he had had time to formulate exactly what he should answer to such an appeal.

"I'm sorry, Norma," he had imagined himself saying. "I'm terribly sorry! But just talking doesn't undo these things, just *saying* that you didn't mean it, and that it's all over. No, married life can't be picked up and put down again like a coat. You *were* my wife,

and God knows I worshipped you—heart and soul! If some day these people get tired of you, or you get tired of them, that'll be different! But you've cut me too deep—you've killed a part of me, and it won't come alive again! I've been through hell—wondering what you were doing, what you were going to do! I never should have married you; now let's call it all quits, and get out of it the best way we can!"

But when he saw her, the familiar, lovely face that he had loved for so many years, when he felt the little gloved hand on his arm, and realized that somehow, out of the utter desolation and loneliness of the big city, she had come to him again, that she was here, mistily smiling at him, and he could touch her and hear her voice, everything else vanished, as if it had never been, and he put his big arm about her hungrily, and kissed her, and they were both in tears.

"Oh, Wolf——!" Norma faltered, the dry spaces of her soul flooding with springtime warmth and greenness, and a great happiness sweeping away all consciousness of the place in which they stood, and the interested eyes about them. "Oh, Wolf——!" She thought that she added, "Would you have gone away without me!" but as a matter of fact words were not needed now.

"Nono—you *do* love me?" he whispered. Or perhaps he only thought he enunciated the phrase, for although Norma answered, it was not audibly. Neither of them ever remembered anything coherent of that first five minutes, in which momentous questions were settled between Norma's admiring comment upon Wolf's new coat, and in which they laughed and cried and clung together in shameless indifference to the general public.

But presently they were calm enough to talk, and

Wolf's first constructive remark, not even now very steady or clear, was that he must put off his going, get hold of Voorhies somehow——

But no, Norma said, even while they were dashing toward the telegraph office. She had already bought her ticket; she was going, too—to-night—this very hour——!

Wolf brought her up short, ecstatic bewilderment in his face.

"But your trunks——?"

"Regina—I tell you it's all settled—Regina sends them on after me. And I've got a new big suit-case, and my old brown one, that's plenty for the present! They're checked here, in the parcel-room——"

"But we'll——" They had started automatically to rush toward the parcel-room, but now he brought her up short again. "It's five-thirty now," he muttered, turning briskly in still another direction, "let me have your ticket, we'll have to try for a section—it's pretty late, but there may be cancellations!"

"Oh, but see, Wolf——! I've been here since half-past four. I've got the A drawing-room in Car 131——" She brought forth an official-looking envelope, and flashed a flimsy bit of coloured paper. For a third time Wolf checked his hurried rushing, and they both broke into delicious laughter. "I've been at it all day, with Aunt Kate," Norma said, proudly. "I've been to banks and to Judge Lee's office, and I've seen Annie and Leslie, and I bought a new wrapper and a suit-case, and—oh, and I saw Kitty Barry, and I got you a book for the train, and I got myself one——"

"Oh, Norma," Wolf said, his eyes filling, "you God-blessèd little adorable idiot, do you know how

I love you? My darling—my own wife, do you know that I want to die, to-night, I'm so happy! Do you realize what it's going to mean to us, poking about Chicago, and sending home little presents to Rose and the kids, and reaching San Francisco, and going up to the big mine? Do you realize that I feel like a man out of jail—like a kid who knows it's Saturday morning?"

"Well—I feel that way, too!" Norma smiled. "And now," she added, in a businesslike tone, "we've got to look for Aunt Kate and Rose, and get our bags; and Leslie said to-day that it was a good idea to wire a Chicago hotel for a room, just for the few hours before the Overland pulls out, because one feels so dirty and tired; do you realize that I've never spent a night on a Pullman yet?"

"And I'll turn in the ticket for my lower," Wolf said; "we'll have dinner on board, so that's all right——"

"Oh, Wolf, and won't that be fun?" Norma exulted. And then, joyously: "Oh, there they are!"

And she fled across the great space to meet Rose, pretty and matronly, at the foot of the great stairway, and Harry grinning and proud, with his little sturdy white-caped boy in his arms, and Aunt Kate beaming utter happiness upon them all. And then ensued that thrilling time of incoherencies and confusions, laughter and tears, to which the big place is, by nature, dedicated. They were parting so lightly, but they all knew that there would be changes before they six met again. To Aunt Kate, holding close the child whose destinies had been so strangely entangled with her own, the moment held a poignant pleasure as well as pain. She was launched now, their imperious, beloved youngest; she had been taken to the mountain-

tops, and shown the world at her feet, and she had chosen bravely and wisely, chosen her part of service and simplicity and love. Life would go on, changes indeed and growth everywhere, but she knew that the years would bring her back a new Norma—a developed, sweetened, self-reliant woman—and a new Wolf, his hard childhood all swept away and forgotten in the richness and beauty of this woman's love and companionship. And she was content.

"And, Wolf—she told you about Kitty! Every month, as long as they need it," Rose said, crying heartily, as she clung to her brother. "Why, it's the most wonderful thing I ever heard! Poor Louis Barry can't believe it—he broke down completely! And Kitty was crying, and kissing the children, and she knelt down, and put her arms about Norma's knees; and Norma was crying, too—you never saw anything like it!"

"She never told me a word about it," Wolf said, trying to laugh, and blinking, as he looked at her, a few feet away. One of her arms was about his mother, her hand was in Harry's, her face close to the rosy baby's face.

"Wolf," his sister said, earnestly, drying her eyes, "it will bring a blessing on your own children——!"

"Ah, Rose!" he answered, quickly. "Pray that there is one, some day—one of our own as sweet as yours are!"

"Ah, you'll have everything, you two, never fear!" she said, radiantly. And then a gate opened, and the bustle about them thickened, and laughing faces grew pale, and last words faltered.

Harry gave Rose the baby, and put his arm about

Rose's mother, and they watched them go, the red-cap leading with the suit-cases, Wolf carrying another, Norma on his arm, twisting herself about, at the very last second, to smile an April smile over her shoulder, and wave the green jade handle of her slim little umbrella. There was just a glimpse of Wolf's old boyish, proud, protecting smile, and then his head drooped toward his companion, and the surging crowd shut them out of sight.

Then Rose immediately was concerned for the little baby. Wouldn't it be wiser to go straight home, just for fear that Mrs. Noon might have fallen asleep—and the house caught on fire——? Mrs. Sheridan blew her nose and dried her eyes, and straightened her widow's bonnet, and cleared her throat, and agreed that it would. And they all went away.

But there was another watcher who had shared, unseen, all this last half-hour, and who stood immovable to the last second, until the iron gates had actually clashed shut. It was a well-built, keen-eyed man, in an irreproachably fitting fur-collared overcoat, who finally turned away, fitting his eyeglasses, on their black ribbon, firmly upon the bridge of his nose, and sighing just a little as he went back to the sidewalk, and climbed into a waiting roadster.

Even after he took his seat at the wheel, he made no effort to start the car, but sat slowly drawing on his heavy gloves, and staring abstractedly at the dull, uninteresting stretch of street before him, where a dismal spring wind was stirring chaff and papers about the subway entrance, and surface cars were grinding and ringing on the curve.

It looked dull and empty—dull and empty, he

thought. She had been very happy, looking up at her man, kissing her people good-bye. She was a remarkable woman, Norma.

"A remarkable woman—Norma," he said, half-aloud. "She will make him a wonderful wife; she will help him to go a long way. And she never would have had patience for formal living; it wasn't in her!"

But he remembered what was in her, what eager gaiety, what hunger for new impressions, what courage in seizing her dilemmas the instant she saw them. He remembered the flash of her eyes, and the curve of her proud little mouth.

"Theodore had more charm than any of them," he said, "and she is like him. Well—perhaps I'll meet somebody like her, some day, and the story will have a different ending!"

But he knew in his heart that there was nobody like her, and that she had gone out of his life for ever.

They had hung the belted brown coat over the big new gray one in the drawing-room, and Norma had brushed her hair, and Wolf had shoved the suit-cases under the seats, and they had gone straight into the dining-car, and were at a lighted little shining table by this time. Wolf had had no lunch; Norma was, she said, starving. They ordered their meal just as the train drew out of the underground arcades and swept over the city, in the twilight of the dull, sunless day.

Norma looked down, and joy and a vague heartache struggled within her. The little city blocks, draped with their frail tangles of fire-escapes, were as clean-cut as toys. In the streets children were screaming and

racing, at the doorways women loitered and talked. Great trucks lumbered in and out among surging pedestrians, and women and children stood before the green-grocers' displays of oranges and cabbages, and trickled in and out of the markets, where cheap cuts were advertised in great chalk signs on the windows. Red brick, yellow brick, gray cement, the streets fled by; the dear, familiar streets that she and Wolf, and she and Rose, had tramped and explored, in the burning dry heat of July, in the flutter of November's first snows.

"Say good-bye to it, Wolf; it will be a long time before we see New York again!"

Wolf looked down, grinning. Then, as they left the city, and the dusk deepened, his eyes went toward the river, went toward the vague and waiting West. The Palisades lay, a wide bar of soft dull gray, against the paler dove-colour of the sky. Above them, bare trees were etched sharply, and beneath them was the satiny surface of the full Hudson.

It was still water, and the river was smooth enough to give back a clear reflection of the buildings and the wharves on the opposite shore, and the floating ice from the north looked like rounded bunches of foam arrested on the shining waters.

Suddenly the sinking sun evaded the smother of cloud, and flashed out red and shining, for only a few brilliant minutes. It caught window glass like flame, twinkled and smouldered in the mirror of the river, and lighted the under edges of low clouds with a crisp touch of apricot and pink. Wet streets shone joyously, doves rose in a circling whirl from a near-by roof, and all the world shone and sparkled in the last breath of

the spring day. Then dusk came indeed, and the villages across the river were strung with increasing lights, and in the tender opal softness of the evening sky Norma saw a great star hanging.

"That's a good omen—that's our own little star!" she said softly to herself. She looked up to see Wolf smiling at her, and the smile in her own eyes deepened, and she stretched a warm and comradely hand to him across the little table.

THE END

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